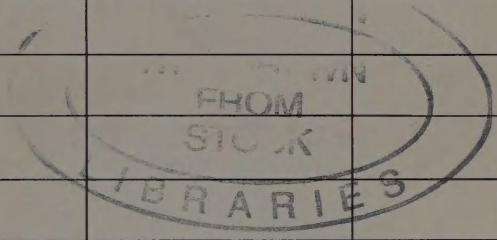


The HERMIT of BONNEVILLE

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The Hermit of Bonneville

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A WILFUL WOMAN
A GODDESS OF GRAY'S INN
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HIS LORDSHIP AND OTHERS
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THE DANCE AT FOUR CORNERS
TOMALYN'S QUEST

The Hermit of Bonneville

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By

G. B. Burgin

Author of 'The Shutters of Silence,' etc.

'Man's love is of man's life a thing apart;
'Tis woman's whole existence.'

BYRON

'Well, God's above all; and there be souls *must* be saved, and there be souls *must not* be saved.'

OTHELLO

London
Grant Richards
1904

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TO

DR. ROBERTSON NICOLL

'A man with insight, look you, who hath written many a book himself, look you. Marry, a worshipful man, and a critical.'—*Old Comedy.*

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THE HERMIT OF BONNEVILLE

PROLOGUE

In prompt obedience to the imperative summons, Father Brunot, parish priest of Bonneville, P.Q., hurried over from Bonneville to Belaine. Full of haste, he left his untended pony at the door, and then reproached himself for callousness to so ancient a friend. As he turned to retrace his steps, a servant met the good Father at the threshold of the château, and explained that he need not distress himself unduly, for Mademoiselle Ivry was in no immediate danger. Thus reassured, Father Brunot comforted the tired pony, and, mopping his heated forehead, followed the servant upstairs.

The silence of the death-chamber was broken only by Madeleine Ivry's struggles for breath as Father Brunot, his eyes full of infinite pity, infinite tenderness, approached the bed and

gently clasped her thin white hands in his own great brown ones.

'How can I help you, my daughter?'

Madeleine Ivry turned her beautiful dark eyes wearily upon him.

'You sent for me. I am here. Did I ever fail you in your hour of need?'

She smiled faintly.

'You are always so kind—and good—always. Thank you for coming; but no one can help me, Father—no one.'

'Why, my daughter? Tell me. If it be within the power of Holy Church to comfort you——'

She shook her head.

'Father, I must seek your aid before I die. You have met Alan Chichester?'

'No, my daughter.'

'Sometimes I wish that I had never seen him either, for in loving him I love a man who loves himself only. But, though knowing all his faults, so dearly do I love him that I hid from him the consumption which is killing me.'

'Was that wise or just to him? Why did you do this, my daughter?'

'You do not understand, Father—you do not understand. To make Alan believe I did not love him, I broke off my engagement without telling him of my illness.'

'But why, my daughter? What induced you to take this rash step? Love is not so slight a thing to be dismissed from one's life at a moment's notice. What was your reason?'

'I was nearly distracted, Father. He loved me in a way, but himself so much more. It was always for himself that he thought, never for me. I wanted to rouse his better self through the sorrow that leads us heavenward, thinking that when he had lost me he would ask himself the reason why, would realize that he could not live for self alone, would learn to love me with that all-absorbing, unselfish love which is God's greatest gift, and so, in loving me again, gradually find his own soul. And——'

'And?'

'I broke off my engagement with him, and he makes no sign. He does not know how quickly I am going from him.'

The priest pondered. Well as he knew the human heart, he had never pictured such a passion as that which, to the exclusion of all else, obsessed this beautiful and morbidly sensitive girl. She had imperilled her soul by loving a heretic, and, now that she was dying, thought more of her lover's welfare than of her own.

The girl saw his perplexity, and a faint smile played around her lips.

'I hoped that when Alan discovered he had lost me, he would yearn for me and seek to know wherein he had erred. That is the way of a man with a maid if he—if he—loves her.'

'My daughter, you may have wounded his pride; that is the surest way of killing love.'

'Ah, Father, if he really loved me he would have come to me, even though he knew himself to be in the right. But the days and the weeks go by, and he makes no sign, accepts my dismissal at once, without a word. If he had loved me, he would surely have sent me one word. But I will be gentler to him than he has been to me. I want a message from me to reach him after—after——'

The priest bowed his head, for he had loved her well as a little child, and still better in the troubled days of her fragile yet beautiful womanhood.

'Your message shall reach him. I will strive for your lover's happiness, heretic though he be, in memory of the thousand acts of tenderness and love with which you have smoothed my thorny path. My daughter, your time on earth is short. Prepare to depart in peace.'

'In peace, Father — in peace! You say "depart in peace" when this dear human world tugs at my heartstrings! Peace!' She again

pressed the cross to her burning lips. 'Some day you will explain all—tell him why I left him?'

'Yes, my daughter, some day I will tell him all—will make him understand why you left him.'

'And you will deal gently with him—for my sake?'

'I will deal gently with him, my daughter, for your sake.'

She smiled pitifully, and clasped his brown hand as if it could bring her back to life and hope and joy.

'Father, I am so lonely; the way is dark; his arms were strong and tender to bear me up. It is hard to go alone. All those who love me can but come to the brink of my grave; they cannot comfort me, help me, plead for me. I am afraid.'

'My daughter, the light from the celestial city will guide your steps. Christ's arms are stronger, more tender still. There is no loneliness, no fear, beyond the grave.'

'Ah-h! beyond the grave. If I could see Alan once more—only once. But it is too late now, Father.'

'Courage, my daughter—courage.'

'Father, I am afraid.'

'Listen, my daughter, and fear not. You are about to die. Think you to face your Creator with

a soul full of despairing doubt or clouded by regret? You have presumptuously taken upon yourself to attempt to save your lover's soul, and you have done wrongly—very wrongly—in not trusting to Heaven's grace for his redemption. Who are you, my daughter, to assume the part of Providence for his punishment?'

'Father, I have done wrong; but I loved him so, and knew that I must die. He was my life, my all. I could think of no better way. I repent me.'

'My daughter, pray to God, and lay before Him the sacrifice of your sufferings, your unhappiness, as an atonement for this mistaken act, and trust to His grace alone to grant your prayer. Of your own strength you can do nothing, but a broken and a contrite heart finds favour in the sight of the Most High. Pray, my daughter—pray without ceasing.'

'I hear, Father—and take heed. I do not deceive myself any more. . . . Hear my confession before it is too late. . . .'

'My daughter, I am listening. Speak.'

I

JARDOT

On the Quebec side of the Ottawa River, midway between Ottawa and Montreal, stands the little seigneurie of Bonneville, so called in honour of the Sieur de Bonneville, who for the last twenty years had pointedly ignored his old château, only returning to it after having completely exhausted his finances in the gay city of Paris. Now that he was growing old, the Seigneur suddenly perceived the wisdom of economy. Abroad he had spent his revenues with lordly extravagance, denying himself nothing. Once more within the château gates, however, he grew niggardly, almost a miser, set about retrieving his position, drove hard bargains with his tenants, and peremptorily refused to help Father Brunot buy a new cassock, although the good priest went about looking like a veritable scarecrow ; in fact, the ladies of his congregation found themselves reluctantly compelled to cast their eyes on the ground as the priest's ragged

habiliments fluttered round the corner. They also petitioned the Seigneur that he would help to reclothe Father Brunot in a new cassock, urging how unseemly it was that the good priest should be mistaken for a scarecrow whenever he strolled into the Bush.

'New cassock indeed!' quoth the Seigneur—'new cassock! Why should I prevent folk from seeing through an old gossip who exacts so much from my tenants on behalf of the Church that there is little or nothing left for myself? It is ill work picking bones when the crows have the start of you. Let Father Brunot move to the North-West and build another church; then they'd make him a Bishop, and I should be rid of the cunning, carneying fellow! Priests! Priests hate women; I love them—all the pretty ones; therefore it is my duty to hate priests. Yes, I hate them—killjoys! crows! They like to pluck the eyes out of the living man because he looks at a pretty woman. As if pretty women were not meant to be looked at! Pouf! Buy Father Brunot a cassock forsooth! I wish that old celluloid collar of his would explode and blow his head off. Had I my will, he'd go barefoot.'

But in spite of the Seigneur's refusal to buy him a new cassock, Father Brunot did not go without it. Over-zealous parishioners repeated to

him the Seigneur's hasty words, and the tale did not lose aught in the telling.

'Gently, my children—gently. Holy Church will deal with the Seigneur and bring him back to the fold some day,' placidly declared Father Brunot, in whom the rigid priest seldom vanquished the human being. 'Jardot, though comparatively poor, shall set the Seigneur a good example. He shall have the privilege of heading the list of subscriptions for my new cassock, and the Seigneur will then feel ashamed of his harsh attitude towards a poor servant of the Church, whose frame is now exposed to the fury of all the winds that blow. For myself, my children, I do not care; I am inured to hardships; but the dignity of the Church must not be compromised by the shabbiness of its servants.'

Halfway along the village street stood the house of Labelle, the innkeeper; lower down, Roche Poulard, when occasionally sober, edited the *Independent* in a primitive old shanty, underneath which lived a pair of striped chipmunks, who loved Poulard, and throve upon the diet of nuts and office paste which, drunk or sober, he never failed to provide for them. Most of Poulard's time, however, was spent in the friendly care of Rabilleaud, the gaoler, who usually lent him money wherewith to pay his fines. Beyond

the gaol was the Catholic Church, gay with tin roof and glittering spire. A little past the church, and leading downward to the river shore, rose the dull gray walls of the stone gaol. Next to the gaol, Letellier, the ferryman, had built himself a wooden hut and stables—the hut for himself, the stables for Chicot and Jeanne, the two ponies who worked the ferry-boat in a kind of squirrel's cage, and knew their places so well that it was not necessary to tie them up. All around Labelle's inn was a spacious veranda with vine-clad posts; the veranda itself was furnished with little iron tables and rough wooden chairs. Here, in the cool of the evening, sat the vieillards discussing the day's news. Marcelline Leduc, who kept the post-office, also had a big veranda. The other houses all betrayed traces of French origin, with their deep dormer windows, solid limestone walls, and massive high-pitched roofs of an older civilization. The wooden floors were painted a rich yellow; in some cases the walls contained recesses for beds. Filling up the left-hand corner, opposite the door, there was always an eight-day clock, with an opening in the lower part of the case to show the swing of a gilded pendule. Between the two windows facing the street, and reaching up to the rafters, from which depended bunches of savoury herbs, stood the customary armoire, also a relic of

the past. There were snowy, beribboned curtains to all the windows, gay little gardens of portulacca and geranium facing the doors, and the inevitable bland, bewhiskered cat surveying the world with crafty complaisance from the wooden doorstep. Canariensis, morning glories, and climbing roses hid the gray walls of the houses, with here and there an occasional Virginia creeper, which, when tinged to glowing red by the first touch of winter's icy breath, rivalled the hue of the maples on the Laurentians' tree-crested summits.

The turfy space between the river and Bonneville, with its scattered clusters of rock-elms and maples, was a gossip-ground at evening, where people sat and chatted, or strolled about, pipe in mouth. Here it was that Father Brunot, when angered by recalcitrant members of his flock, reluctantly made his power felt. Every soul in Bonneville—man, woman, or child—soon knew of his refusal to shake hands with Jardot, when that worthy, who had a wild streak of romance and rebellion in him, encouraged by the Seigneur's example, strenuously declined to head the list for the new cassock, and, further, objected to certain small contributions due from him to the coffers of Holy Church—contributions which everyone else paid with gay good-nature and warm gratitude to Father Brunot.

From the day when he permitted himself to be insolent to Father Brunot, Jardot became a marked man. Without any open agreement to do so, the neighbours gave him the cold shoulder. When his children went to school, the other children avoided them. If he wanted to sell anything in the weekly market, he failed to find a purchaser. Should Jardot chance to meet a fellow-farmer on the road between Bonneville and Belaine, there was no cheery greeting, for the farmer suddenly became engrossed in his horses and did not see Jardot. His cattle died, his horses grew lame, there was a blight on his crops. A whisper ran round the market-place that if a man valued his soul's salvation, it was better to have nothing to do with that whimsical fool Jardot, who occasionally read books and wrote verses, which he sang to tunes of his own composing. It was unwise to speak to a man whom Father Brunot passed with a frown. Jardot, annoyed by this social outlawry, and the uncomplaining misery of his beautiful wife and equally beautiful children, became quarrelsome, drank hard, got into trouble for half killing an old enemy, Pierre Lotbiniere, and was promptly arrested by Rabilleaud. People declared that if Lotbiniere died, Jardot ought to be hanged. But Father Brunot hushed up the battering of Lotbiniere,

hurried post-haste to the gaol, obtained Jardot's release, told him what a fool he was to kick against a stone wall, once more shook hands with him in public, patted his children on the head, walked up and down affably conversing about his whip-poor-will song with the man who had insulted him.

'You have given in. You have helped to pay for the new cassock. You are a wise man. Now we can know you again, send your children over to play with ours, and all shall be as before,' said the neighbours. 'Give our love to madame, and tell her from us that you have played the fool long enough, Jardot. Better play the fiddle as of old—it is not so dangerous. Even a poet ought to know that he wastes his breath who argues with a priest, a mule, or a woman.'

Jardot, shrugging his shoulders, turned sullenly away.

'The priest is too strong for me: he has killed all the music in me. If he were a bad man, I would slay him. But he made Lotbiniere hold his peace and not give evidence. What can I do against the terrors of Holy Church? It is better to pay the price and be friends with one's friends, is it not? Come, let us drink. Margot is happy again; that is all I care about. That plausible devil of a Seigneur led me into this, and then left

me in the lurch, wretched old sinner that he is! A woman will cut his throat some day when he least expects it, and I won't move a finger to help him.'

The day after Jardot's release, Monsieur de Bonneville (he had watched the struggle from afar without lending Jardot a helping hand) met him with a scowl.

'Poltroon! Why didn't you come to me? I would have helped you to make a good fight if you had held out a little longer,' he said fiercely. 'Is this meddlesome priest stronger than you or I or the whole world?'

Jardot, twisting his cap in his hand, looked sullenly down into the dusty road. Hot anger burned in his heart against priest and Seigneur alike.

'Yes, Seigneur,' he said hopelessly, 'Father Brunot is stronger than you or I or the whole world. A man cannot go against the Church: the Church always wins. If you fight it all your life, you can't die without the rites.'

'It is your cowardice.' The Seigneur twirled his gray moustache. 'Your cowardice, Jardot. Do I pay dues? Do I go to Mass? Am I bon Cat'lique?'

'No, Seigneur; but you are great, powerful. Father Brunot dare not meddle with you. You have influence at Quebec. He lets you alone,'

'Very well, then. You have spoken. Grow great, be powerful, and he will let you alone also. There's nothing but women to fear in this world, Jardot; and they are the very devil; they have such good appetites that they have eaten up all my forests. I, who fear nothing else, am afraid of women—young women, not old ones. But a priest—no. He is only an old woman.'

He again pulled his moustache with a fierce air and strode away.

'Old loup-garou!' muttered Jardot, staring after the Seigneur's upright, well-preserved figure—'old loup-garou! He wanted to annoy the priest and make a fool of me. Afraid of women, is he? Gossips tell another story. I wonder whether she is really his wife, that beautiful demoiselle whom he brought from France a month ago and keeps shut up within the gates. Some say "Yes," others "No." But little he cares. Wine and women—women and wine! Pouf! He fears nothing—not even Father Brunot with the Church at his back; and I—I am afraid of my own shadow. I would like to see the lady of the château. They say her hair is of spun gold, and that she has no friends. Surely he dare not keep her there against her will? All our women are black, but she is fairer than a lily.'

He called to his team and started towards the

château gates. Jardot enjoyed certain privileges from Monsieur de Bonneville, in return for which he furnished the Seigneur with fifty cords of wood per annum.

'It is a good thing I met him here,' he said, drawing his load round to the farm-buildings at the back of the château. 'Now, the Seigneur, who is as sharp as the devil, will not see me unload the green wood in the heart of it. If one has to pay for the support of priests, it is only fair that one should be permitted to cheat others. Besides, the Seigneur set me on to insult Father Brunot, and then left me to fight him alone. That green wood will help to pay for the Seigneur's share of the cassock.'

He unloaded the wood, dexterously piling the unseasoned part of it where it could not easily be seen, and led his tired horses to the outer gate. As he shut the gate after them, he turned to look at the old château slumbering in the sunshine. In spite of the warm, spicy air, the perfume of pines, whose minute needles ceaselessly vibrated and intermingled with one another, the peaceful shade of giant poplars towering high above the roof, there was an air of sadness and decay about the place. The long, heavy branches of the cedars swayed monotonously, drowsily, to and fro as if languid with excess of summer. A great pine

rose up to the top window of the square tower, its scant branches rubbing and chafing against the iron bars with every breath of air. Suddenly there was a glint of gold at the window, a white hand thrust wide the latticed pane, a girlish face looked out.

'Ah, mon Dieu, here is something to pay me for my journey!'

All the romance in Jardot's nature awoke with a rush which set his temples throbbing. He forgot his comely Margot, with her level brows and eyes of jet, her flashing white teeth and tender heart. That face! That glint of gold at the window! Ah-h! There it was again. Mother of God! He had seen her at last, this prisoned bird kept by the Seigneur in his ancient tower. Jardot drew a long breath, crept under the sheltering branches of the pine, and looked up. The girl looked down.

When Jardot caught the blue of her eyes, he was as one of the blest; when the wooing winds blew a strand of her golden hair into the sunshine, and the sunshine kissed it to a brighter glory, he crossed himself for happiness. She looked down again, and her face was so exceeding fair that Jardot felt his knees knock together, lips parch, hands tremble. The broad low brow of her was whiter than a dove's wing; her teeth were pearl;

her smile, as she looked at him, had a questioning sweetness. She beckoned, and Jardot quickly climbed the tree, keeping the trunk between himself and the house. No sound was heard save his laboured breathing until his head rose level with the window. The sullen light in Jardot's eyes disappeared; they shone with the eagerness of youth.

'Mademoiselle, I am here,' he said simply and waited, though his eyes were thirsty as he looked at the long slim fingers resting carelessly against the bars, the glowing golden hair which clung around her young, white throat.

She caught the thirst in them and smiled—a rather tired smile. For one so young, she looked unnaturally sad.

'Why are you here?' she asked. 'If the Seigneur sees you, he will shoot you. Why are you here?'

'To—to serve you, mademoiselle,' stammered Jardot. 'There are rumours in the village. People have seen your face. I could not rest till I had seen it, too.'

Her lovely face paled; the colour in it came and went.

'Ah!' she said. 'There are rumours? Would that I were back in my convent again, where no one spake evil. And what do the good' (she laid

a somewhat satirical emphasis on 'good') 'folk say of me?'

'They say——'

Jardot hesitated. How could he tell one so young and fair of the coarse jests of the vieillards as they drank on Labelle's veranda!

Her eyes changed.

'Never mind. I do not wish to hear. Your name?'

'Antoine Jardot, mademoiselle.'

'A tenant of the Seigneur's?'

'A tenant of the Seigneur's.'

'Then you are not free to do as you please?'

'I am free to do whatever mademoiselle wishes.'

She smiled dazzlingly and stretched out a white hand studded with quaint gems.

Jardot kissed it with the rapture of sixteen, although he was nearly thirty.

'I will do your bidding,' he said simply. 'Mademoiselle is the innocent victim of the Seigneur.'

'Even if it brings you into conflict with the Seigneur?'

'If it brings me into conflict with the whole world.'

There came a sudden cruelty into her smile—the cruelty of a girl who has been unexpectedly

confronted with the realities of life and finds them hard to understand.

'Yet you are nearly thirty? Married, is it not so? Yes, you look like a married man. I did not know that there was any romance left in—married men!'

Confused by the light of her bewildering eyes, Jardot would have given worlds to be eighteen again. The smothered, sullen fierceness of the man's soul fell from him.

'I am any age mademoiselle pleases; and I will do her bidding to the world's end.'

'Find me a champion, then—someone to rescue me. I am tired of the château; it is worse than my convent. There, I had friends and the good Sisters; here, there is no one but a treacherous old man.'

'Mademoiselle, I will find you a champion.'

Jardot prepared to descend the tree, as if her request were an everyday one, and he expected to find champions ensconced in the neighbouring bushes.

'What are you about?'

There was amusement in the girl's smile, though the sadness remained.

'To find mademoiselle a champion. If he does not rescue you, I will kill him and do it myself.'

'I can trust you?' She looked doubtfully at him. 'A few months ago I trusted everyone. Now, I do not know whom to believe.'

'Mademoiselle may trust me to the death,' emphatically declared Jardot.

'Trust you—a mere peasant, habitant, farmer, woodcutter? Besides, how can you help me?'

'If the Seigneur keeps you shut up here against your will, I can kill him.'

His eyes narrowed to mere slits; fortunately for the Seigneur, he had gone down to the village.

'No,' she mused; 'it is useless. Even if I were to leave here, you could not help me. I have no money—yet. I must wait awhile until I am my own mistress.'

She turned away.

Jardot gave a low cry of pain.

'You do not trust me, mademoiselle—you do not believe me.'

The girl drew a little gold chain from her neck.

'I do trust you with all my heart. Give that to the champion.'

She thrust it into Jardot's rough hand and disappeared.

Jardot remained looking at the little chain. There seemed to be something peculiar in its

pattern, for it was curiously fashioned with a feminine face for every link; and the face was that of the girl who had just left him.

He gazed into the dusk of the room, but she had retired to an inner apartment. He feared that he heard a sob.

Pressing the chain roughly, ashamedly, to his lips, Jardot placed it in his breast and slid down the tree. At the foot of the tree, he looked up to the window; but the lady of the château did not reappear.

Jardot drove slowly home in a dream, mechanically stabled his horses, and went into the kitchen, where his beautiful wife sat by her spinning-wheel, pushing from time to time the cradle at her feet. For a moment he watched the twirling wheel, then laid a strong hand upon it until it slowly ceased to revolve.

'Wife Margot, blessed angel that you are, what is a champion?'

Dame Margot looked up, and her dark eyes flashed.

'A champion, b'nhomme, is a man who fights battles for someone. Sometimes it is for a cause, sometimes for a woman. There were champions in the good old times; nowadays, a woman has to take her own part.'

Jardot's brow cleared.

'La, la!' he said, with a smile; 'I thought that was it. I will find her a champion.'

Margot picked up the sleeping child from the cradle and put it into his arms. The baby woke, caught Jardot's thumb, wrestling mightily. Jardot laughed with a clear conscience, and told his wife all.

Margot listened with composure.

'She is a witch. Show me the chain.'

Jardot drew the chain from his breast. Margot looked at it thoughtfully—at the proud curve of the lips, the straight, sensitive nose, the lovely contours of the miniature face.

'That face will make many a heart ache before she dies,' Margot said, putting the baby back into the cradle. 'Had you meant to be false to me, you would not have shown it.'

'False to you!' stammered Jardot.

'Yes, false to me, my dear, headlong poet. Eh, eh, eh? Look at that face and at mine. She is a sun-kissed apple on the bough; I am the overripe fruit on the grass. Oh yes, b'nhomme, she has bound you fast body and soul; but I do not mind. There was always something in you different from the others—a touch of the poet; and now the poetry has come to you. But'—she looked at him a little wistfully, the light of love in her dark eyes—'I have stood by you in your fight with Holy Church. Why should I not

stand by you now, when your soul is torn between two women? When you were beaten, shunned, despised, I drew you to my heart and put fresh life into you. Swear to me on the cross, b'nhomme, that you will never forsake me. Then I can hold you fast. Swear.'

Margot held the little cross before his eyes, and he swore gladly. Then she drew him to her breast, kissed him on the eyes and lips, and thrust him roughly from her.

'There, there, b'nhomme. Let us have done making fools of ourselves. You shall have your romance as a reward for giving in to Holy Church.'

'Had it not been for your sake, I would never have given in,' he said angrily—'never!'

She drew his head down to her as he knelt by the spinning-wheel.

'This is your reward: you shall serve the lady of the château, and find her a champion. Take away the chain from your heart; it hurts my cheek. Do you remember the first time in the apple-orchard at gran'père's, when you drew me to your heart, and the good old man caught us, and—swore? Thousand grasshoppers, how he did swear!'

Jardot kissed her ruddy lips, half chafed, half reassured, that she should love him so.

'Growl, chien, growl!' she murmured, and rocked him in her arms :

> '"Doesn't matter w'at you're chasin',
> Doesn't matter w'at you're facin',
> Only watch de t'ing you're doin';
> If you don't, ba gosh ! you're ruin'."

Now it is all right and square between us, big bébé of Bonneville. Find your champion, serve your yellow woman ; but I—I have your heart.'

'Yes,' he growled, embracing her with his mighty arms, 'you have my heart ; but I must find the champion.'

She pushed him toward the door.

'Go and find your champion, b'nhomme—find your champion ; then—come back to me. I will be good to you, still the fierce fever of your blood, rock you to sleep on my breast, great bébé of Bonneville.'

He returned, knelt at her feet, buried his handsome head in her lap.

'Yes, I will come back to you. She is a fever of the blood, this yellow woman. You are strong and beautiful and dark ; she is slim and fair as an angel. Like mates with like, and I will come back to you.'

'La, la! p'tit chien. Go away,' she cried merrily, and rocked the cradle anew.

Jardot went away. Suddenly he smote his forehead with his brawny hand.

'Pouf! I was nearly forgetting the Englishman; it is time for him to arrive. Father Brunot —always Father Brunot—warns me to be good to him, thinks he is a little mad. Father Brunot has had letters from the Bishop saying that the Englishman is not to be allowed to come to any harm. As if one could hurt an Englishman! Maybe I'll go down to the hut in a few days and see how he is getting on. They are either very choleric or very cold, these Englishmen. Oh yes, I know them. But this one has paid a good price for the mill and the hut. Wonder what has become of the Iroquois girl who used to live there? I expect she has gone away, although I put her in as a fixture, ba gosh!'

II

THE SEIGNEUR'S WARD

THE Seigneur's ward gazed after Jardot until he disappeared, then dried her lovely eyes. An hour or two later, she wandered down into the beautiful garden overlooking the river. Life was dull—oh, so dull!—and she did not know how to escape from this monotonous old château, with its cross servants and utter lack of interest. The only event of the day was the passing of the river steamer. She could see its black funnels through the trees, then the white, swan-like body floated away into the distance. But it never brought anyone to succour her, and after a few days she ceased to look for it.

Only a month ago—it seemed centuries—the Seigneur had brought her from a convent school in Paris—that Paris the beloved memory of which was rapidly becoming a dream—brought her, with her pretty dresses, bonnet-boxes, photographs of school friends, and all. She knew that she was

an heiress, that she would not come of age for some months; but she did not know that Fate had delivered her, bound hand and foot, to the mercy of the Seigneur, and that he regarded her as his most valuable asset in the scheme of financial reform involved by his pressing necessities. Her parents were dead; she was alone in the world with the exception of the Seigneur, and when she thought of the latter's impassioned wooing of the previous evening—the contents of the Seigneur's cellar were old, and he always wooed with far more expression after dinner than before it—she was very much inclined to wish that even such an exception as the Seigneur did not exist.

The Seigneur, moodily pacing the river-bank, and still ruffled by his encounter with Jardot, hastened to meet her. Elise de Marsac, thinking of the heroes of her maiden dreams, could not reconcile herself to so preposterous a wooer, for the Seigneur's nose (it had once been a very good shape) was now fiery red and of a bulbous tendency at the tip. His dark eyes were still handsome, although slightly bloodshot, and even the carelessness of his dress could not hide a certain air of arrogant distinction, derived from a constant habit of command and an awe-inspiring gray moustache. For a man of sixty, he was well

preserved. Had it been possible to divide him into two men of thirty, Elise felt that he, or they, would be much more interesting. Sheltered by the grim walls of her convent school, seeing little of the outside world save an occasional visit to the houses of her girl friends, taught by the good nuns to look upon all men as wolves in sheep's clothing, Elise often wondered at a Providence which made the sheep's clothing so much more attractive than the wolf's original covering. Now that the Seigneur showed himself to be a wolf, she found, to her own astonishment, that she was not afraid of him. So skilfully had the good nuns guided her that they had always avoided coming into conflict with a will which they had long ago discovered to possess more than womanly firmness. Led tactfully by them, it had never occurred to Elise that she, too, was born to command.

Elise slightly acknowledged the Seigneur's salutation, and motioned to him to sit down beside her on a rustic seat. The overjoyed Seigneur did so, thinking that at last he had overcome her objections to his suit. His experience of women had been so vast that he could not imagine a mere schoolgirl withstanding his wooing. True, he was no longer young, but, then, the girl was fresh from her convent school, and

knew little or nothing of the outer world. His old friend, her father, had been an obstinate man. Sometimes the Seigneur wondered whether the daughter inherited the family firmness. If she did, his conquest would not be nearly so easy as he imagined.

'Beautiful as the place is, I fear you are a little tired of it, Elise,' he said, looking at her admiringly. 'What say you to a return trip to Paris? In Paris, one lives; here, one simply vegetates. Paris is the world; it comprises everything.'

The girl sprang up with a musical exclamation of delight.

'Let us go at once. You will take me back to the convent?'

'For a brief visit, yes, although I do not fancy that they would admit me.'

'You!' The girl stared at him in astonishment. 'Why should they? Of course you would not go with me.'

'I think I should. You are much too young and pretty to be left alone, even in a convent. Surely you would not wish to desert your husband so soon?'

'Oh!' The young girl vainly tried to repress the sarcasm in her voice. 'It is, then, your intention to provide me with a husband?'

'Certainly,' said the nonchalant Seigneur. 'I thought I had mentioned the matter before—several times.'

'And this gentleman? One usually meets a husband before one marries him. Is he young, handsome, dark or fair? When am I to have the pleasure of meeting him?'

'He is not young, as the world reckons age; he is not handsome—not strictly handsome; he is not dark, and he is not fair. In short, you have already met him,' said the Seigneur.

'It must have been in my dreams, then; I was not aware of it. Come, tell me. What is he really like?'

'Just like myself. He stands before you.'

The Seigneur rather stiffly got up.

The girl laughed in a little rippling crescendo which annoyed the Seigneur. He changed colour.

'Let me tell you, mademoiselle, that a husband is no laughing matter. When can you be ready?'

The girl's laughter changed to scorn. She looked down upon him with icy contempt.

'When can I be ready? Permit me to inform you, Monsieur de Bonneville, that if my poor father were alive he would tell you what a coward you are. As he is dead, I, his unhappy daughter,

say to your face that you are the nastiest old man I have ever met!'

'Then you cannot have met many,' declared the Seigneur, seeking to control himself. 'Come, come, Elise, be reasonable! You haven't a friend or relation in the world. If you marry me, I will take you abroad and give you everything you want.'

'You—give me—everything—I want!'

'Well, pretty nearly.' The Seigneur was amazed by her scorn. 'That is, unless you are hopelessly extravagant.'

The girl looked at him dreamily.

'Oh, but don't you know what a wicked thing you are doing? You can't know. Compared with you, I am little more than a child.'

'All the more reason that you should have someone to protect you from the wiles of the world. A seasoned watch-dog is always the best.'

'What I really want'—she came a step nearer to him, nervously opening her fan, and there was an ominous fire in her beautiful eyes—'what I really want is someone who will protect me from you.'

'From me!' The Seigneur looked at her in genuine astonishment. 'Oh, there's no harm in me. I only want to marry you.'

'Why?'

The question came with the speed of a rifle-bullet.

'Why? Oh, because you are friendless, and I owe it to your father to look after you.'

'You are quite sure that it is not a question of —money?'

'Money!' The Seigneur flushed. 'What do you know about money?'

'Oh, even in a convent one learns that the world moves on money. Besides, I am under the impression that in a little while I shall be an heiress.'

'Quite a mistake — quite wrong. A mere pittance—a few dollars. The expenses of your education have eaten up your money. You are dependent upon me for the rest of your life. Of course, as my wife, I should make you a good allowance. We could throw open the château and entertain.'

'On my pittance? You forget you told me last night that everything here was mortgaged up to the hilt.'

'Ah! so I did. Still, with economy we might be able to do it.'

'You also forget—it must be age which is affecting your memory, Seigneur—that the good nuns pride themselves on being excellent women

of business, and that it is their aim in life to make their pupils excellent women of business also.'

'Quite a misplaced ambition on their part,' retorted the discomfited Seigneur. 'It is a woman's business to marry; that is the only business in which she should interest herself. Then she becomes doubly interesting to her husband.'

The girl repressed her indignation with an effort.

'You further forget that you have seen so much of the world, and that I have seen so little. You have lost your illusions, your ideals; mine are fresh, beautiful, dewy with youth. You do not believe in God, in His goodness; you sneer about good women. I believe in God, in His goodness. I believe that all women are good, except when they have been made bad by men like you. You betray your trust, you bring me here, shut me up in your old château, wish to force me to marry you. I will never marry you. Someone will deliver me from your hands.'

'Pooh, pooh, Elise! Be reasonable. I have only to throw the handkerchief for half the girls in Quebec to jump at it.'

'I belong to the other half.' She stamped her little foot impatiently. 'I will pray to God to help me. He will send me a champion—young,

brave, handsome—who will show you how contemptible you are, how you have betrayed my father's trust.'

The Seigneur tapped his left index-finger on the palm of his right hand.

'You are devilish handsome when you lose your temper, Elise. Now, look here. A romantic girl like you is almost too silly to live. I offer to provide for you. There is only one way in which I can do it, and that is by marrying you. As my wife, you will find every house in Quebec open to you; as my wife, you will have a career.'

'Yes; but what kind of a career! As your wife, I should sink to your level,' she said hotly. 'Oh, it is cruel, cruel, to be met with such a disillusionment on the very threshold! But I will find a champion to deliver me, someone who will humble you in the dust. I will go away. I——'

'Where to? You have no money. My servants are devoted to my interests. All your movements will be watched. You cannot escape me. If you were to get on the train, you would be put off again because you could not pay for your ticket. No house is open to receive you.'

'My father's friends——'

'Your father has been dead so long that he is forgotten. I am your legal guardian. You can

do nothing. Make the best of what is inevitable. You are utterly alone in the world.'

The girl appeared to deliberate.

'Now you see the hopelessness of resistance, you will be more reasonable. If you'll promise to amuse yourself here until my return, I'll go away for a week, in order to give you time to reflect. Youth is so headstrong, so imprudent, so—so thoughtless.'

'And age is so calculating, so mercenary, so selfish. If it will rid me of you for a week——'

'Don't; that's not ladylike,' mocked the Seigneur. 'Remember the traditions of the family to which you are about to belong, mademoiselle, and preserve your dignity until it is as matchless as your complexion. I see you consent. Au revoir, then.'

He strolled away with jaunty footsteps, and she remained looking after him as he went along the path. For the first time in her young life, she was confronted with realities. The world was not the beautiful place she had imagined it to be. It was not full of good people, whose only aim was to help one another. There were sordid men like the Seigneur, who became villains and betrayed their trust—the trust which dead men reposed in them. But she would not be false to her own womanhood; she would not give herself

to this old man's arms. If she were only patient; if she, Protestant though she was, believed with the good nuns that God tries us in order that we may triumphantly rise above trouble and temptation, all would yet be well. Someone would come to help her, to deliver her from the Seigneur, this impossible old man, who did not even say that he loved her. Perhaps, after all, it was better that he should not profane so holy a passion as love with false protestations. It was useless to waste time in tears. She must act before he came back. These beautiful grounds were but a prison. She hated them. Oh that she could escape, even for a little while, into the woods! She could think there; she would be nearer to God and farther from man. It was cruel that she should have life's realities thrust upon her so soon. But the Seigneur had shown her the evil of the world. She remembered old Sister Dolores' tender voice: 'My child, even when evil appears to conquer the world, it is only temporary. Sooner or later God accomplishes His aims through us, His unworthy creatures. We are but instruments in His hands for the purification of our own souls, and when we sin most He is devising means to win us back to Him.' Was the Seigneur sinning unconsciously? She did not think so.

'I must escape from here,' she murmured

breathlessly. 'Escape, if only for a little while. The place stifles me. I cannot breathe. But how can I leave it? How can I get away?'

The girl saw the Seigneur drive off in a buggy, which was somewhat unsuited to his exalted rank, for the paint wanted renewing, and the horse, though spirited, had shabby harness. There was a certain dignity about the Seigneur which made Elise de Marsac try to reconstruct him as he must have been forty years ago. Then the buggy disappeared down the winding drive, and was swallowed up by the mournful cedars and pines. For a few days, with the exception of old Marcelline, who acted as lady's maid but was in reality a spy upon all her movements, she would be alone.

How could she escape from the place for a time without being discovered? At that moment, Marcelline waddled round the corner and surveyed her with a good-natured smile.

'Eh bien, my child, you cannot run away. I shall be back in time to get your dinner, unless the coming storm stops me. You will have the wolf-dogs for company. Don't be afraid of them. They will not leave the place or you either.'

Marcelline whistled to the two great, shaggy, dun-coloured hounds on the lawn, and pointed to Elise. The hounds bounded up and licked

Elise's hands, for she had made friends with them.

Elise watched Marcelline follow the track of the Seigneur's buggy, and turned towards the house. Then a sudden thought came to her. She threw her arms round the hounds' necks, kissed them, and darted lightly up the grand staircase until she reached the old garret wherein was stored the accumulated rubbish of centuries.

In a little while she found what she wanted, and dragged it out to the light. It was the life-sized figure of an Iroquois girl, complete in all its savage finery—moccasins, beaded deerskin skirt —somewhat scanty, but still a skirt—leggings, blanket, necklace, and all.

She brought down the figure, made the dogs smell every part of it, took off its black wig and tried it on.

'That won't do,' she said anxiously. 'How am I to disguise myself? I wonder what there is in this little quill-embroidered pouch.'

Certain pigments were wrapped up inside the pouch in a piece of soft doeskin. She wetted her finger, dipped it in one dark powder, and found it left a copper-coloured streak on her white wrist. Then she moistened the paint again to make sure that it would not come off too easily.

'Now,' she said, patting the dogs, 'I think I

shall be able to take a little trip into the Bush without attracting the attention of the Seigneur or the Seigneur's servants.

With all the glee of a child, she dressed herself in the Indian costume, carefully staining her face, neck, shoulders, arms, and hands with the disfiguring pigment. It was more difficult to get her own glorious hair under the black wig, but, with the aid of many hairpins, she at last succeeded.

When she came downstairs there was no one about. The hounds rushed at her, then wagged their tails. She was safe from them. For a fortnight past she had petted and fed them when the Seigneur was not near. They loved her, both of them.

They whimpered their disappointment when she turned them back at the edge of the Bush and wandered onward.

'Now,' she said joyously, 'I will get under the trees and think.'

Presently she struck a well-worn forest path, and, following it, entered a little glade. In the centre of the glade was an old mill, fed by a rushing stream. By the side of the mill was a hut, the door of which stood invitingly open. It was evidently inhabited, for a thin column of blue smoke curled upward and disappeared between the dense foliage.

A loud thunder-clap made her start. There was a rustling of soft steps of invisible animals seeking cover, a patter of rain on the leaves, another loud clap, a vivid lightning flash, and the heavens opened.

Elise darted across the glade, and sprang panting into the hut.

'It will be over soon,' she murmured; 'then I can go back to the château again.'

After she had waited patiently for an hour, the storm grew worse. Womanlike, she began to inspect the hut and keep the fire alight. In an old tin can she saw some sort of stew which had evidently been allowed to cool. She put it on the fire.

'The person to whom the hut belongs will thank me,' she said, with a light-hearted laugh, and proceeded to explore the premises.

When she had gone all over the place, she came back with the glee of a child.

'I wonder if I dare look out,' she mused. 'Even the Seigneur would never recognise me. I can't disguise my blue eyes, though. Still, I can keep this striped blanket well over my head. It would be like looking down a tunnel for anyone to try to discover the colour of my eyes.'

She went to the door, and noticed that the rain had filled up the hollows caused by footmarks

leading towards the depths of the Bush. The footprints were very small.

'Look like a girl's,' thought Elise. 'I wonder why that forked bough—it seems freshly broken off—points towards the departing footsteps. Perhaps it means that she is never coming back. If the owner of this place doesn't appear soon, I shall steal some of that stew. The storm has made me feel ravenously hungry.'

Drawing up a log to the fire, she sat down upon it. The rain pattered on the roof, the thunder roared, the lightning flashed, but the novelty of the scene filled her with delight.

'Perhaps God will send me my champion,' she said in a little hushed whisper, as the rain fusilladed against the window. 'If the rain doesn't stop soon, I must creep back to the château. Old Marcelline will not go to my room till eight o'clock, and very likely she will stay in Bonneville until the storm is over. I must have a little of this delicious stew. Perhaps I may be able to find some bread in the cupboard.'

She found a tin pannikin, and was about to help herself to the stew, when there was a splash, splash of feet on the little path, now ankle-deep in water.

'Someone is coming!' she cried, and drew the blanket over her head.

III

THE STRANGER

THE young Englishman stepped off the train as it stopped at Bonneville, and swore loudly; then he felt better. If he had been asked the reason for so unseemly an exhibition, he would have said that it was because the storm threatened to wet him to the skin; and the desolate-looking Laurentians were clothed in a mantle of mist. This sudden convulsion of nature in the middle of summer appeared to justify any number of strange oaths; further, he swore because the violent rain soaked under his upturned collar; also, on the general principle that, as he was far from home, and apparently friendless, he was entitled to relieve his pent-up feelings by any means in his power.

The 'C.P.R.' train, unmoved by this sudden outburst of bad language, started off on its trip to Vancouver, with a light-hearted assurance that, notwithstanding the dangers of the track, it would

ultimately arrive at its destination; for there is a belief among 'C.P.R.' engine-drivers that a Canadian engine can follow the route of any creeping forest thing. Hence occasional accidents, despite ceaseless official vigilance. But, as a rule, the train travels without disaster. Sometimes, however, it gets through into a lake or river and never comes up again; but, fortunately, this is not an everyday occurrence.

The Stranger—dark, handsome, and of a peculiar sadness, which showed itself in every listless movement of his long limbs—did not take any interest in the inhabitants of Bonneville, who, fascinated by his fluent apostrophe to the rain, crept out of the waiting-room where they had been watching the train's arrival. There was no getting in the hay during these storms. What was the use of spreading it out to dry and then putting it up in cocks again? So they shook their heads philosophically, left the hay to rot, and strolled down to the station to await the arrival of the afternoon train. In these melancholy circumstances, the arrival of a stranger who swore so fluently was a distinct boon; it helped to pass away the time, and possibly might add to their own adjectival store by the accumulation of strange words. They were also not wholly displeased to discover that, if the Stranger did not

know enough to come in out of the rain, he would get very wet, and were much interested in watching the newcomer's sudden awakening to the knowledge of this elementary fact.

The station-master, seeing the solitary passenger survey with sad indifference a heap of miscellaneous trunks which had been hastily dumped down by the baggage-smasher of the retreating train, suggested with characteristic politeness that it was getting wet, and the Stranger, rousing himself from the apathetic state into which he had fallen, agreed with the station-master; in fact, it was evident to the most casual observer that the things were very wet already.

The half-dozen habitants, smoking vile native tabac under the shelter of the station shed—tabac strong enough to poison a horse—looked on at the luggage, but did not stir. The consensus of opinion was strongly against this maladroit Stranger, who made no effort to be amiable when amiability would have produced a dozen offers of help. It was their storm, and he had no right to object to it. Did he think that the good God made the Canadian climate to suit his (the Stranger's) convenience?

'He wears to himself a white shirt, though it is not a fête-day, ba gosh!' observed old Toussaint Leduc, whose monkey-eyes peered out from

shrivelled features begrimed with dirt; and a murmur of disapproval greeted this monstrous discovery.

'Oh, mon Dieu! Gloves!'

'Watch-chain—real gold!'

'Nom de pipe! shinee boots wit' pointed toes!'

'Chapeau blanc!'

'And he is—shave. Bah! Is anyone else shave? Tam fonnee!'

All these remarks were made in what the habitants imagined to be English, so that the Stranger should not lose their full force.

The station-master, noticing the disapproving tone of his neighbours' comments, felt that he must do something to counteract local bad manners, so picked up the smallest box and laboriously carried it into his office.

'You don't ask us to mak' help you,' said Toussaint to the Stranger, and expectorated with startling precision at a piece of wood which lay in his line of vision.

He fixed his eyes upon the wood until the healing rain washed his offence away, then he repeated it.

The Stranger, for the first time conscious of Toussaint's presence, turned on his heel and went up to the station-master.

'Thanks,' he said, with languid courtesy—

'thanks; it's awfully good of you to help. Are my things safe from—that?'

He pointed with undisguised contempt at Toussaint.

'Mais oui, m'sieu,' declared the station-master. 'Toussaint is poor, but honest—as he t'ink. He would not mak' to steal one fly.'

'Perhaps he'd steal two; he doesn't seem particular. Besides, these aren't flies,' objected the Stranger; 'they're trunks. He looks queer.'

'Le bon Dieu feenish him queek—too much hurree. Toussaint cannot mak' to help his face,' apologetically suggested the station-master.

'Might wash it,' declared the Stranger; 'that would make a difference. Perhaps, though, it's kinder of him to hide it; it might frighten his dearest friends.'

Seeing that the Stranger did not appear satisfied with his personal beauty, Toussaint spat at another piece of wood, and angrily expressed a desire to meet him in single combat with knives or guns.

The Stranger paid not the slightest attention to this sanguinary programme, but asked the station-master the way to Jardot's Mill.

'Jardot's Mill!' The station-master was amazed. 'Is it you dat moulin b'long?'

'Yes; I'm not a miller, but I've bought it,

said the Stranger with decision, 'although I am at a loss to understand how the matter concerns you.'

'But, eef not, why you mak' to buy it?' not unreasonably inquired the station-master, disregarding the latter part of the Stranger's remark.

'Know how the great Peabody made his first fortune?' somewhat irrelevantly asked the Stranger.

'Peabodee—mais non, m'sieu. Peabodee! Eef he is friend to m'sieu, I shall like to know vair much.'

'Made his first fortune by minding his own business,' said the ungrateful Stranger; 'and then he made another by letting other people's alone.'

'But you t'ink, you, to mak' fortune out of de moulin?' queried the inquisitive station-master, quite forgetting to apply the Stranger's remark to his own rule of conduct.

The Stranger, disdaining to satisfy the station-master's curiosity, gave him directions about sending on the luggage next day.

'De track is not vair good,' suggested the station-master, willing to hold this whimsical being in talk. 'Beeg holes. Dere is what you call mud—boue.'

'Then make it better,' suggested the Stranger,

with emphasis. 'You've plenty of time in which to do something useful. Anyhow, get the things there to-morrow. Straight down for a mile and a half, I understand, and then into the Bush along the river-bank. How do I get into the Bush?'

'Down de road. M'sieu will rest chez-moi until de matin. My house is here. V'la!'

He pointed to a pretty little wooden house with a gay garden, in which the flowers bent beneath the soaking rain.

'Thank you,' said the Stranger, with a momentary smile; 'but I prefer to start at once.'

'Then m'sieu must himself commit to Heaven,' said the station-master decisively.

'Why?' asked the stranger.

'Tell to him, mes amis.'

The station-master turned to Toussaint and his friends.

'It's troo de wet Bush.'

'Dere's not notin' to eat.'

'No shingle on de roof.'

'An'——'

'That will do,' said the Stranger more courteously. 'I am obliged to you for your information.' He handed the station-master a ten-dollar bill. 'Kindly send me down some food.'

'M'sieu insults to me. I am not merchant, moi.'

'Well, you'll have to be. I can't go about in this storm looking for stores. See this!'

The Stranger nonchalantly produced a letter from a high official of the railway company, and the station-master's spine became supple.

'Thought you'd help me. Like to see any more letters?' The Stranger put his hand into his pocket. 'I've half a dozen here.'

'Mais non, m'sieu,' said the station-master; 'dat is plaintee. M'sieu will ride on de horseback?'

'Haven't a horse.'

The station-master obligingly fetched his pony —a piebald broncho, tougher than wire, and as wicked as original sin. It was better to make any sacrifice rather than have the Stranger continue to produce peremptory letters from his inexhaustible store.

'Thank you. Quite sure you don't want any more letters?'

'Quite sure, m'sieu.'

The Stranger unfastened a portmanteau, took off his trousers, put them into the portmanteau, and drew on a faultlessly-cut pair of breeches and boots.

'Pegar, but I am tam!' said Toussaint.

'Do not thus impulsively anticipate your future.'

The Stranger walked admiringly up to the

game little broncho, whose first impulse was to snap at his arm, then to kick the rest of him into eternity; but the newcomer's appreciative eye met his, and the broncho, feeling that appreciation was a novelty, tamely allowed himself to be mounted.

Toussaint, who knew the broncho, was manifestly disappointed, for he felt that the pony had not lived up to its reputation. In spite of the other habitants concurring in this view, the broncho quietly ambled past the gaol, the Stranger's long legs nearly touching the ground, his broad shoulders showing squarely through the drenching rain.

'The pony knows the way,' he called out to the station-master as he disappeared. 'I'll leave it to him.'

He dropped the reins on the broncho's neck, and, nose to ground, it followed the track until they reached the entrance to the Bush. Here the Stranger halted a moment, and looked at the melancholy foliage of the pines, the dark brown Ottawa lashed into foam by the fury of the summer storm, the white wooden huts nestling at the water's edge, and, in the far distance, the opposite shore.'

With a sigh of satisfaction, he plunged into the Bush.

'No one will take the trouble to come after me. Here I am made one with Nature,' he said, patting the pony's neck.

The broncho turned an amiable visage to his new friend. His glance was apologetic.

'Poor devil!' said the Stranger. 'I'll buy you from the station-master. I thought you'd understand me. The curse of modern civilization is that no one has time to understand himself—or anyone else.'

He patted the broncho tenderly.

The pony loped steadily onward along the narrow track, as the stranger, crouching low over his mane, endeavoured to dodge the bending branches of the pines.

'This,' he said, 'is just what I like—not too crowded. A fellow can think here. Here I shall be able to find out why life's tragedy has overtaken me. In cities a man can't think, can't find out anything.'

A wet bough struck him across the face, and he forgot to think.

When he recovered from the sudden contact with the wet bough, the pony had stopped in a little clearing about a couple of hundred yards from the Ottawa's shore; the brown, foam-flecked water showed sullenly through the driving storm. In the centre of the clearing, at the side of a deep

stream, stood a desolate-looking wooden mill, surrounded by a fence of split cedar. The mill was very old. Where the bark had peeled away from the logs, the deficiency had been made good with clay.

The Stranger surveyed with marked satisfaction the building crumbling to decay, its untidy gaps, its gaping shingles. There was a large desolation about it which appealed to him, an ostentatious untidiness which was almost magnificent in its reckless abandonment of all elementary principles of ease and comfort.

'Splendid!' he ejaculated under his breath—'splendid! Couldn't find a quieter place anywhere. Bath-room right on the spot, too. Must be full of water-snakes. I wonder the scoundrel who sold me the place didn't charge for water-snakes as an extra. Perhaps he didn't think of it, although he seems to have thought of everything else in the way of extras.'

He dismounted from the pony, slung the rein over his arm, and pushed open the mill-door. It creaked loudly, and admitted him with reluctance. The pony walked into a little stable as if he knew all about it and wanted to get out of the wet.

The Stranger, before attending to his own wants, took off the heavy saddle, tied up the pony, and gave him some of the hay which he

found in a corner. The pony looked grateful, but surprised.

'Oh, it's all right,' said the Stranger. 'Have as much hay as you can eat; when that's gone we'll get in another load. By-and-by, as soon as the things come up, you shall have some sugar.'

The broncho left off eating, looked with wistful, beautiful eyes at his new master, and turned towards him.

The Stranger understood.

'It's all right, old boy;' and the broncho nuzzled his nose against the Stranger's waistcoat in mute apology.

'You didn't know,' said the Stranger. 'No wonder you wanted to eat me. You look as if you hadn't had a square meal for a week. We'll soon alter all that.'

With a nod to the pony, he gave him a kindly pat and entered the hut.

'What the dick——'

He stopped short in amazement at the scene which met his gaze.

There was a glowing fire on the hearth, and a young Indian squaw, clad in all the picturesque finery of her race, squatted before it. She looked up as the Stranger entered, with a shy grunt of welcome. The greeting was melodious, but still

a grunt. It suddenly occurred to the bewildered Stranger that she was very handsome.

The Stranger felt taken aback by this unexpected apparition. Had he fled from the presence of woman only to find her awaiting him upon his own hearthstone? Who was she? How long did she intend to stay there?

'Humph!' he said, seeing that she did not move, 'you must be one of the fixtures taken over by Jardot when he bought the place from the old scoundrel who used to own it.'

He pulled out a list from his pocket and carefully examined it.

'Item, one squaw.'

Somehow it had escaped his attention. In his present state of mind, it suited him better to pay for everything in the lump rather than worry about details; but now that the details had assumed so startling a shape, he felt that he had acted unwisely.

'Wonder what Jardot has charged for her,' he said, again consulting the list. 'I suppose she looks after the hut. He's charged for every imaginable thing, and is not likely to have thrown her in as a gift.'

The sum marked on the list against the item 'Housekeeper—coloured,' was ten dollars.

'Not extravagant,' said the Stranger—'cer-

tainly not extravagant, if she can cook. My life may yet be of value to someone, although it doesn't look like it at present. Perhaps even in my present miserable state, it wouldn't be right for me to experiment with myself in the matter of cookery. The only reason for allowing a woman to live is that she may expiate her crimes by good cooking. If the squaw can't cook she'll have to go, and we'll consider the ten dollars a bad investment.'

The squaw nodded, as if understanding his unconscious ultimatum, got up, stirred the fire, and took off it a tin pot, which had once been a petroleum can, but now did duty for a saucepan. A strange mass seethed and bubbled in the pot. Then she sat down again with the air of one who is obviously very much at home, and quite prepared to do the honours.

The Stranger, seating himself on a log, reluctantly sniffed the appetizing odour which filled the air; the steam from his wet clothes partly obscured the 'Housekeeper—coloured.' There was a grace about her movements which pleased him. Once she laughed at his melancholy visage, and it occurred to him that her laughter was melting and melodious. He smiled involuntarily, conscious of the ridiculous figure he cut in his soaked shirtsleeves.

'Heap good,' suggested the squaw, emerging with a birch-bark platter full of savoury stew from the vapour bath caused by his rapidly-drying clothes.

She fished a hunk of corn bread out of a primitive corner-cupboard, quaintly fashioned from an old barrel, and the half-drowned Stranger made a hearty meal, washed down by a cup of water from a little spring outside the hut.

When he had finished eating, the squaw fetched him a long pipe from the inexhaustible contents of the corner-cupboard—a pipe which was fantastically yet æsthetically decorated with human hair. The Stranger started, for it seemed to him that the taste of the hair might get into his tobacco. Reassured by the squaw's matter-of-fact manner, however, he emptied out the mixture of dried willow-leaves with which the pipe was filled, and substituted some of his own tobacco. She put a live coal on the top of it, gathered up the remains of the stew, and hurriedly withdrew to the stable to eat alone. He heard her babbling to the broncho, as if anxious to make friends with him.

The Stranger's first impulse was to apologize to the squaw for his lack of manners in not having asked her to share the meal. Then he remembered that in all probability she was obeying the

strict laws of Indian etiquette, and that it was better to begin as he meant to go on. Cheered by this reflection, and still smoking, he proceeded to explore the house. The mill he could leave until later; that was merely an ornamental accessory, although it cost ten times as much as the hut. As a feature in the landscape, it had a certain value; as a mill, it was archaic.

The two other rooms in the hut, though small, were fairly comfortable. One harboured a white owl, which hissed at the Stranger until he hurriedly withdrew; in the more habitable room of the two was a rude bunk covered with Mackinaw blankets, as brilliant as a tulip bed.

'This must be my bedroom,' thought the Stranger. 'Let me see if it's in the list. Those blankets are a bit trying to an Englishman's unsophisticated eyes. It will be just like sleeping under a rainbow.'

The bunk—at a price—was mentioned with the other scanty fixtures, including three hens and a rooster.

'Good!' said the Stranger, his countenance lighting up. 'I like fowls; they're much better company than human beings. I expect they're somewhere in the stable. To-morrow I will call on them and make friends.'

Darkness fell suddenly, although it was only

seven o'clock. When he returned to the front-room, a huge log blazed gloriously on the hearth. Outside, the plangent wind rushed round the corners of the hut as if striving to twist it to pieces; the burning log emitted a resinous perfume. By sitting on his rug and leaning against another log, the Stranger found that he was able to gaze into the fire and stretch his long limbs at the same time.

'This,' he said, sucking drowsily at his pipe, 'is true comfort. To-morrow I will make a chair. I —I've never seen a blue-eyed squaw before. Wonder how she came by those forget-me-not eyes; some strange freak of Nature. Now I shall have to learn Indian or else use sign language. Perhaps sign language will be better. I don't want to talk to a woman again if I can help it; she'd always have the last word. A good-look—good-look—— Why, I—I'm getting —slee—slee——'

The pipe dropped from his mouth, he slithered along the ground until his head rested comfortably on the log, and slept the sleep of one to whom tranquil slumber has long been unknown.

Presently, Elise looked cautiously into the hut, her beautiful copper-coloured face glistening with rain-drops. Seeing that the Stranger was asleep, she made a little gesture of amused satisfaction,

crept into the other room, and brought back the Mackinaw blankets, which she softly threw over him.

After noiselessly putting another log on the fire, she muffled herself in a blanket, and, still with an amused smile on her lovely face, went forth into the storm. What, after all, if this should prove to be her champion!

Had she not won him to her cause by ministering to his hunger when, without her, he would have gone supperless to bed? Yes; he was handsome enough for a champion—much handsomer, indeed, than any man she had ever seen.

When Marcelline came to call her to dinner, Elise protested that she was not hungry. Before eating the savoury stew, she had quite forgotten that there would be late dinner at the château. In the present tense state of her nerves, she wanted to be alone. Life had suddenly become very absorbing. Even the Seigneur, in spite of his repellent villainy, or because of it, demanded a certain amount of attention.

Marcelline, who was cross from having been drenched on her way back, went grumblingly away, and for nearly an hour the girl remained gazing into the great wood fire which had been kindled in the old open fireplace to counteract the damp caused by the storm. She saw there

the Stranger's thin, handsome face, with the dark grief-stains under the eyes. How sad and ill he looked! Perhaps he had met with some great misfortune, and had come to Nature to heal him of his hurt. It would be far more interesting to help him throw off this trouble than to listen to the Seigneur's perfervid wooing. After a time she would make herself known to the melancholy owner of the mill and seek his aid. Yes, here was a champion ready to her hand. How horrified Sister Dolores would be if this wild freak ever came to her ears! But life was so hard, so dull for her with this wicked old Seigneur, who had villainously betrayed his trust; and youth seeks youth.

To escape from her thoughts, Elise threw open the window. There was a lull after the storm,

> 'And the wind blowing from out of space
> Gathered the scent of the stars!'

How dewy sweet and delightful the air! Would she ever fall in love? Or was she one of those

> 'Cold-blooded souls who meet Love's sweet embrace
> With pulses calm and with averted face?'

There sounded an owl's weird hoot through the swaying branches of the pines, and Elise wondered whether it were the great white one

she had seen in the hut. Poor Stranger! It was sad for him to be left all alone with an owl and a pony when she wanted to hear what misadventures had befallen him in his quest of the Fortunate Isles. She shut to the window and dreamed of him all night.

IV

THE STRANGER DREAMS

THE next morning the Stranger awoke refreshed by his long sleep. To his astonishment, he felt hungry, and, as the squaw was nowhere to be seen, improvised a somewhat crude and unsatisfactory breakfast. Day by day, he lived the solitary life and found that it was good. Most of his time was spent in wandering through the Bush, or else, mounted on the pony, which followed him about and loved him, he rode 'way back.' But he always returned from these excursions with renewed zest for the society of Rube (Rube was the red rooster) and his hens and the copper-coloured squaw.

The Stranger had originally christened the squaw 'Minnehaha.' In a day or two, however, he shortened the name for general use to Minnie, and became almost cheerful when Mrs. Rube No. 1, presented him with a thriving family of nine chicks, who declined to live in the

stable, but took up their quarters in the spare room, despite the white owl's indignant protests, and spent their wakeful evenings in the kitchen—at least, Mr. and Mrs. Rube did, but the downy chicks—they distrusted the white owl—nestled under their mother and woke up at intervals to emit chirrups of sleepy content. This seemed to the Stranger to be true domesticity without any of its drawbacks. Minnie, when she condescended to put in an appearance, 'ran' the cuisine on the simple principle, if she wanted things, of taking any food which happened to be on the premises. Her ideas of domesticity and household duties were somewhat vague. For all the use she made of it, she might never have seen a duster. Often she disappeared for days together, and the Stranger was reduced to cooking his own meals, a task which, assisted by the Rube family, who seemed to think they were entitled to a share in the results, he performed with more or less skill. Sometimes the sympathetic broncho, who, like Agag, walked delicately, and never trod upon a single chicken, condescended to put his head in at the door and nibble at the Stranger's jacket as he bent over the fire. By degrees, when he rose in the mornings and found a broken branch pointing to the depths of the Bush (this was 'Fixture 47's' allegorical way of indicating

that she had 'put out' for unknown regions), the Stranger grew tired of expecting things to be done for him, and did them himself. If he addressed a spirited remonstrance to Fixture 47 on the subject of her erratic ways, she listened with grave attention, folded herself in her blanket, and stayed away an extra day to punish him. She never spoke in reply to these reproofs, for the Stranger was careful to impress upon her the admirable qualities of silence. Women, he added, somewhat gratuitously, had talked the world to a standstill, and, if it were ever to go on again, it was now time that the lords of Creation should have a chance to make their voices heard. Sometimes, the Stranger did not know his own voice; it was no longer querulous, but that of a man who conquers his fate by bearing it. His midnight vigils in the Bush were gradually beginning to convince him that he deserved his lonely lot.

At mealtimes, when she happened to be at the hut, Fixture 47 always withdrew to the stable and ate in the congenial society of the broncho. If the Stranger's cooking—it was apt to be uncertain—was not to her liking, she came back, threw it away with an expressive gesture, and showed him how she thought it ought to be done. This method, although expensive, taught the

Stranger to be careful. Once or twice his stores ran short, and he was reduced to the painful necessity of riding to Bonneville to renew them. But his handsome face and the broncho's glistening coat attracted so much approving attention from the village girls that he blushed beneath the tan, and only revisited Bonneville at night when the moon was low.

If Fixture 47 condescended to look in and do his cooking, the Stranger took a book and went out of the hut into the Bush ; they never spoke, save in monosyllabic grunts, although the squaw was as beautiful as a bronze statue. The Stranger, being a shy man, did not venture to inquire into her family arrangements. Conscious that, in spite of the payment of ten dollars, he had no legal ownership over her, he contented himself with a shrug of the shoulders when things went wrong. As a rule, the squaw's cooking was confined to first principles, and sometimes, as is occasionally the case with most first things which have no fixed precedents to guide them, she made mistakes. Supper over, the pony generally untied his head-rope, and wandered into the kitchen, to the great disgust of Mrs. Rube, who, full of family cares, was always fearful of his dainty little hoofs ; but the broncho, disdaining to notice her clucking appeals, hung his head over the

Stranger's shoulder until supplied with sugar, then returned to the stable and waxed fat.

At the rare intervals when the Stranger thought of Minnie at all, it was solely in the light of Fixture 47, her number on the list. If the squaw caught the devotion of his four-footed and feathered friends for him, she did not show it, but went upon her dusky way, only the smouldering fires in her beautiful blue eyes—eyes that were strangely out of keeping with so dark a skin—betokening that she was conscious of a new element in her life. As soon as the Stranger's shirts began to get worn and frayed, she substituted exquisitely embroidered doeskin ones as a matter of course; and when he found that his town-made shoes were heavy and uncomfortable, she seemed equally to understand that it was her mission in life to provide him with still more exquisitely embroidered moccasins.

The Stranger's sallow cheeks gradually became bronzed; his listlessness disappeared. The resinous scent of the pines filled him with vigour, the lap-lap of the water on the Ottawa shore made music in his ears. He strode the forest paths a young god, the broncho following closely behind. Although he carried a gun, he never shot anything, to the secret disgust of Fixture 47, who went so far as to show him the empty

petroleum can with a significant gesture—a gesture which implied that it was useless his looking forward to a successful future in the Happy Hunting Grounds of the Great Manitou, because if he shot nothing now he could never hope to be a good sportsman in the next world. The Stranger shook his head, turned away, hung up the gun; and when Minnie thought that fresh meat was good for the family, she hinted as much by putting the empty potroleum can in his bunk. She had the rare gift of humour, although it seemed to be blended with pain when the Stranger, giving way to a fit of moody sorrow, remained indifferent to the blandishments of the whole Rube family. When the fit had run its course, he would sighingly return to present realities, and stuff his protégés with corn until their crops nearly burst.

A week after his arrival, the Stranger, who, on unpacking his things, had flung a copy of Henley's poems into the corner cupboard as fiercely as if he had suddenly seized an adder, was amazed to find it again on the rough table. Wondering how it came there, he picked up the book. As he did so, some fragrant Indian grasses fell out of its pages. It was evident from the slight stain on the leaves that the grasses had been newly placed there. Yes, here were the old-remembered lines—the

lines he and she had read together when she was the rose of the world—the rose about to nestle in his heart :

> 'Life's rose! Life's rose! Red at my heart it glows ;
> Glows and is glad, as in some quiet close
> The sun's spoiled darlings their gay life renew.
> Only—the clement rain, the mothering dew,
> Daytime and night, all things that make the rose,
> Are you, dear—you!'

With passionate fury he thrust the book on the fire, holding it down as the leaves curled upward. Presently only the covers remained ; but the essence of the Indian grasses, fragrant alike in life or death, filled the hut—filled it with unquiet memories of dead love, of burning hate, of smothered anguish, of tones which came to him in the night-watches—those tones which a man hears, and, hearing, sees before him all the sorrowful path which he must tread unto the end. Dear eyes looked into his. Again her voice rang clear and sweet, although for ever hushed in the Great Silence. The woman had broken faith with him, and ere he could reproach her for her treachery, had—died! All his life had gone out with hers into the darkness.

> 'The clement rain, the mothering dew,
> Daytime and night, all things that make the rose,'

had gone with her. Henceforth there was no

light, no fragrance anywhere. The rose of the world was a cankering shame, a bitter remembrance, a burning regret. Hugging his pain, he fled into the Bush, and heard her voice in every sigh of the wind. If she had lived, he might have poured out upon her the vials of his wrath, his biting scorn! But she had gone her journey of all days without a word, without a sign, save that another man had held her head pillowed on his breast, another hand had clasped her dying fingers. And when the other man came to him with a message, he had refused to listen. 'She has gone,' he said wearily. 'That is enough. You robbed me of her love. Some day I hope you will suffer as I suffer. Then I will forgive you, but not till then.'

And now, although he had buried all memories of the dead woman deep within his own heart, her voice reached him again in her favourite poem. Why had the unlettered squaw thrust the fragrant grasses into the book? This dead girl, this wrecker of his faith, had died in Belaine, and, despising himself for his weakness, he had come to Bonneville to school his heart into forgetfulness. 'Tell me,' the other man had said—'tell me whether your love for her was greater than your self-love? If that is so, I have a message for you; if your love is so small that it cannot survive

apparent injury, if it is so pitiful and mean a thing that it does not wholly forgive even in death, my message must remain unspoken.'

He knew that in the first shock of her giving him up he had thought only of himself, that he had never considered her motives until afterwards, when it was too late. Perhaps she, too, had suffered in breaking faith with one man and pledging her faith anew. She had ever a conscience which was extortionate rather than exacting. 'Daytime and night, all things that make the rose,' had been hers. And she was dead! Sometimes, he wished that he could have listened to her message; sometimes, he wished that he could have risen above the thought of self to the great heights of a love which endures all, forgives all. Would that other man ever seek him again? He hoped not. And yet! And yet! He groaned and fled onward through the Bush, making much of little things in order that he might forget the one great thing without which life is but dust and ashes, a weary journeying of empty ways. When he returned to the hut, tired out and travel-stained, she seemed to be awaiting him there with that unspoken message. And still he could not forgive her, but hugged his angry sorrow closer to his heart.

Even in this remote solitude, however, there

were not lacking social distractions had he cared to avail himself of them, but he did not care. On several occasions, Toussaint Leduc and his friends, repenting of their former aloofness, sought to conciliate the Stranger, and the Rev. Eliphalet Stegg, a 'tub-thumper' from Belaine, clad in glossy black broadcloth, made a domiciliary call upon him. The Rev. Eliphalet, after a somewhat formal exchange of preliminary courtesies, was shocked to find 'Minnie' sewing there, and said so in rather circuitous phrases. For some time the Stranger (he had been secretly bored by his unexpected visitor) endured the Rev. Eliphalet with patience. When, however, the reverend gentleman, emboldened by his unwilling host's silence, threw out a broad hint that the inhabitants of Belaine might not think it right that 'this duskily fair and attractive daughter of Belial should minister unto him,' the Stranger's wandering attention was aroused. After being a dreamer of dreams for so long, it was something to have to deal with a matter sufficiently mundane to need vigorous treatment.

'Do you mean Fixture 47?' he inquired in a tone which betokened danger ahead.

'I don't understand,' said the Rev. Eliphalet a little uneasily.

'She's "Fixture 47" on my list, although I

haven't been able to get all the other forty-six from Jardot,' said the Stranger. 'A nice fellow Jardot—plays the fiddle divinely; but you have to rise very early in the morning to get ahead of him, and he is generally up first.'

'But about this Indian girl?' interrupted the Rev. Eliphalet, who had not come there to discuss Jardot's peculiarities.

'Well, what about her?'

'Do you think it right to have her here?'

The Stranger's eyes glittered ominously, yet his tone was courtesy itself.

'Am I to understand,' he asked, 'that the squaw's presence here is distasteful to you and your fellow-citizens of Belaine? People in Bonneville have more sense than to worry me about such a trifle. But I suppose that you have come here to-day to tell me that you and your pharisaical friends object to the presence of Fixture 47 in my ménage? Out with it, man—out with it!'

'That's about the size of it,' said the Rev. Eliphalet rather uneasily. 'Oh, my young friend, do not be "taken with veiled eyelids"; turn from the error of your ways, and seek the paths of——'

'Hold on a moment,' said the Stranger, as if suddenly recollecting something. 'Fixture 47, we cannot discuss your moral character in your presence; it might put nasty ideas into your head.

You have my permission to retire. Better leave your sewing here. It will temper the fierceness of our controversy, and prevent us from being brutal to one another. At least, I hope so, for I am in a very bad temper already.'

Fixture 47, with a gleam of amusement in her blue eyes, gracefully withdrew. She seemed to be about to say something, but stopped just in time. Her sewing remained on the log which by tacit consent was regarded as her particular seat.

When she had gone, the Stranger raked a coal from the smouldering fire, lit his pipe, and sat down again.

'Now,' he said thoughtfully, 'let us understand one another. As a man of the world, I suppose you mean that I ought to know better. Is that it? You think it is unseemly that this taciturn, copper-coloured Venus should seek my society?'

'Yes,' said the Rev. Eliphalet, 'that is my sorrowful meaning. "Let not thine heart decline to her ways." Oh, my young friend——'

'Thank you,' said the Stranger. 'I am not your young friend, and I don't think I'm much inclined to decline to your ways. You tub-thumpers always suspect evil when no one else ever thinks of looking for it. You'd better go now, while there's time. I find that you are making me angry, and I shall be angrier still with

myself for allowing such a man as you to disturb my hitherto unruffled calm.'

'But, my dear young friend, pause and reflect. Remember that there is more joy, etc. More bitter than death—yea, much more bitter—is the woman whose heart is snares and nets. Besides, unless I receive a subscription—a small subscription for mission work among the heathen—I must make a report of this matter—this grievous matter—to my elders at Belaine. What can I say to them save that you are unregenerate, that you glory in your iniquity and are unashamed, that your feet are turned towards the bottomless pit? How can I reconcile it to my conscience to go until——'

'Oh, get out of the place—you poison the air—and give your overworked conscience a brief rest!'

The Stranger languidly reached up for a whistle which hung against the wall. Then he blew a shrill call. A second later there came a patter of tiny hoofs, and the broncho, looking like a fiend, with bristling mane and gleaming eyes, bounded into the room.

'Turn him out!' said the Stranger, pointing to the Rev. Eliphalet. 'This—this gentleman is impugning our morals.'

'But——'

'Better go quickly,' the Stranger placidly

observed. 'Stay here another minute, and he'll savage you. I wouldn't give much for your chances if he once gets hold of you. I can't keep him back much longer. Besides, you can judge for yourself what magnificent teeth like his can do when they once get to work. He's a fiery little dev——'

'But this is most unchris——'

'Go!' thundered the Stranger, letting loose the plunging broncho; and the reverend gentleman stayed not on the order of his going, but departed minus a portion of that glossy broadcloth which was the pride and delight of his life. It is needless to say that he left this portion of his trousers in the mouth of the broncho, and, with some difficulty, Fixture 47 subsequently persuaded the wicked little animal to part with it. After trimming it carefully, she discovered that there was just enough material to make a handsome cartridge-pouch. When it was finished, and neatly ornamented with stained porcupine quills, even the Rev. Eliphalet would have found some difficulty in recognising his lost property. In default of being able to procure more suitable material, he was reduced to patching his garments with a piece of coarse sacking—a circumstance which, when he took his walks abroad, recalled anew to him the loss with which he had been afflicted. What

was still worse, however, from the Rev. Eliphalet's point of view, it also recalled to the inhabitants of Belaine the circumstances attending that loss.

The Stranger smiled a melancholy smile as, bellowing for mercy, the Rev. Eliphalet disappeared in the distance.

'Poor Fixture 47! Even in these primitive wilds, people are just as uncharitable as those of the towns. It often takes a minister of religion to rake up all the nastiness of the world. I wonder whether,

> '"When He returns, and finds the world so drear—
> All sleeping—young and old, unfair and fair,
> Will He stoop down and whisper in each ear,
> 'Awaken'?"

Ah, even here, come strange echoes of the old lost life, the sullen desolation, the melancholy vapours, the despair of a man who has nothing to which to look forward, because he has been fool enough to believe in a woman! "One man in a thousand have I found; but a woman among all these have I not found."'

He strode drearily into the Bush, stretching his arms up through the branches.

'O melancholy Maker of the world, I, too, am beginning to discover that I have fallen very low. Try me no more, but raise me up with

Thy strong right hand. Give me something to live for, something to hope for, something to—to pray for. The woman I loved—the woman who once loved me but played me false—is—dead. The world, too, is dead, and I live on—alone!'

'Forgive!' breathed into his ears the soft murmur of the pines. 'Forgive! Then shalt thou hope to live again.'

'For——' He looked wildly round. 'Do I hate her still?' Aghast at this discovery, he drew a long, shuddering breath. 'Can I, having once loved her, carry my hate beyond the grave?'

'Beyond the grave,' came the soft susurrus of the pines.

'She has defiled my soul, has dragged me in the dust!' he cried with dilated eyes. 'O Lord, if she has slain in me all that should be immortal, how then can I learn to forgive?'

He flung himself face downward in the grass, his arms outstretched in the shape of a cross. 'Forgive! forgive! God, teach me to forgive!'

'For—give! for—give!' whispered the pines, as Fixture 47 crept noiselessly away through the Bush.

V

THE QUARREL

JARDOT began to feel worried, for this business of seeking champions was no easy matter; they did not grow on every bush. In the first flush of enthusiasm caused by the unknown lady's beauty —a beauty which haunted him night and day—he had said to himself that he would find her a champion right speedily. But for what? Why was she, to all intents and purposes, a prisoner? Was she the Seigneur's wife? No, she did not look like a wife. There was a virginal purity and freshness about her which could never have survived the Seigneur's coarse caresses. Ah! the Seigneur. How could he reconcile it with his conscience to pry and meddle with the Seigneur's affairs, to take part against him in some momentous issue? He had known the Seigneur for five-and-twenty years, the lady for as many minutes, and yet at her bidding he was prepared to break all ties which had bound him to the lord of the

château. Surely it was difficult to find an excuse for himself when he considered that for a hundred years his forefathers had been, practically, vassals of the De Bonnevilles. Even in a new land these old French families maintained a kind of feudal state which necessitated vassals; and this unconscious vassalage was in the blood of their humble dependents. Of course, although the De Bonnevilles' rights over the lives and bodies of their vassals had become modified by a new world, there still remained that unwritten law—that bond of custom—the influence of which was stronger than any legal enactment could possibly be. In the old days, when one man made war on another, he warned him, threw down his gage of battle, did not stab him in the back. Before he (Jardot) could possibly interfere with the Seigneur's plans, and do his best to free the captive of the tower, it was necessary that there should be some readjustment of his relations with Monsieur de Bonneville. What a worrying world it was! First, the courting of Margot Labelle, and the incidental disabling of her numerous suitors. After that the wedding, the christenings; later, this struggle with the Church, in which he had been ignominiously worsted because the Seigneur had not openly supported him. No; at all costs there should be no more misunderstandings with Holy

Church. One might as well be a pariah at once. It would be much better to quarrel with the Seigneur than with Holy Church. But he did not want to be bothered with these weighty affairs ; they destroyed all pleasure in living. Life was good when he could sit in the porch of his cabane and play the violin, putting into it all the soul of the Bush, the music of murmuring winds, the lap, lap of the river against the boulders on the shore. Now, when he sat down to play, the music would not come as of old. It was plaintive, wistful, sad, told of injustice and wrong, pleaded with him for liberty. He grew thin, and was cross with 'p'tite Gabrielle' and the bébé.

One evening, Margot, coquettishly dressed, came out to the veranda, where he sat moodily beneath the vines, and took away his violin.

'Eh bien, b'nhomme, it is time to act,' she said composedly. 'You don't notice my pretty ribbons. When you fail to notice my pretty ribbons, there is something wrong with you. Go and find your champion or drown yourself. You will end by falling in love with the yellow woman if you sit talking to her like that. Then I will cut your throat, and you will be sorry for yourself when you find out how charming I shall look as a widow.'

'Cut my throat, angel! You love me enough for that!'

He drew her to him, crushed her against his breast.

'You don't understand. Sometimes I don't understand myself. I want to help her,' he cried fiercely. 'She does not come between us. Now are you satisfied?'

'Satisfied! I have your oath; but, for all that, this yellow witch, I like her not. I am jealous of her. She makes my man dream dreams, and they are not of the woman who lies by his side.'

She held him from her with an arm nearly as muscular as his own.

'You are spoiling my ribbons. Jardot, b'nhomme, you must find her a champion. When you have found one, she will be too busy with him for you to make music to her. You understand, married man?'

He shook her gently.

'Wasp! Black-eyed wasp! You have honey on your lips, yet you sting. There is no doubt I am married—too much married. I dare not say my soul is my own.'

'It isn't; it's mine. Go and find a champion.'

'Find a what?' The Seigneur, with wine-flushed countenance, stood leaning against the veranda post. 'Pardon me for interrupting a conjugal tête-à-tête, Madame Jardot, but I want to speak to that scoundrelly husband of yours.'

'Scoundrel!' Margot's black brows became blacker. 'Scoundrel yourself, Seigneur! He is the best man unhung.'

'He may not always be—unhung,' said the Seigneur significantly. 'If I had my way, and we lived in the good old times of la belle France, I would string him up to a tree for the crows to pick his bones. How much longer am I to be swindled by you, Jardot?'

Jardot was relieved that the Seigneur did not suspect the truth.

'The Seigneur is good enough to wish to hang me? Possibly, we might hang together if all were known;' and he glanced significantly at the château.

'So you have been nosing about within the gates!' cried the Seigneur furiously. 'I might have known that a man who would palm off green wood on me would not stop at that.'

'M'sieu forgets,' said Margot, with an irresistible smile, 'that Jardot has a family to support.'

'Let him smoke out his own family and not mine, then,' said the Seigneur fiercely. 'I happened to sell that wood at a small—a very small—profit, and half of it is thrown back on my hands because it is unseasoned. I, who have been such a good friend to him, too,' he added in injured tones

'Friend!' Margot was roused. 'Friend! Yes, the kind of friend the wolf is to the lamb when the wolf is hungry. Some wolves, Seigneur, are always hungry.'

'Lamb! Jardot a lamb! He looks like a lamb, doesn't he!' suggested the Seigneur, with ironic emphasis. 'Wolf would have been more appropriate; it is I who am the poor deluded lamb.'

'Since when has a lamb gray hair?' asked Margot, trying to divert the Seigneur's attention. 'Eh bien, if the talk is to be believed, it is you that are always pursuing the lambs, Seigneur.'

'I won't have it,' said the Seigneur quickly. 'If I did get you into trouble, Jardot, with Father Brunot, I would have helped you out of it again.'

'An ounce of help is worth a deal of pity, Seigneur. Margot has suffered greatly. You left me till I had to give in. Now I must leave you.'

'Leave me!'

'Yes, leave you,' said Jardot, with spirit. 'I throw off all allegiance to you, Seigneur. I renounce you and all your works.'

'Which, I suppose, is another way of calling me the devil himself, Jardot. You are mad. Leave me! Why?'

'I do not like your—your morality.' Jardot

hesitated for an appropriate excuse. 'I do not like your morality.'

'No, we do not like your morality, Seigneur,' said Margot, hands on hip, swaying saucily towards him. 'We do not like your morality. You are growing to be an old man, Seigneur. When a young man is gay, it is bad; when an old man is bad, it is not gay. Oh, you know what it is, and so do the girls who have had the misfortune to listen to you, Seigneur. Better mend your ways, M'sieu. Better mend your ways, or some day you will have to mend your head.'

'Mend my ways! — mend my head!' The Seigneur became apoplectic with wrath. 'Mend my ways! If you'd mend your wood, Jardot, and thrash that talkative wench occasionally, it might be better for you, ungrateful pig that you are!'

'M'sieu then washes his hands of me?' quietly asked Jardot. 'M'sieu's hands have needed washing for some time past.'

'Impertinent scoundrel! Wash my hands of you! Eh—eh?' The Seigneur peered at him suspiciously. 'What's the meaning of this, Jardot? What devil's game have you up your sleeve?'

'Nothing, Seigneur, nothing. Only I am

tired of serving a man who gets me into trouble with Father Brunot, and leaves me to fight it out alone.'

'Oh, that's it, is it! Well, perhaps I was to blame, Jardot—perhaps I was to blame. I was busy with other matters. You should have come to me and reminded me. It is not too late. We can begin again. We are too old friends to quarrel. I'll say no more about the wood. Madame Jardot, you are handsomer than ever. If Jardot were not here, I would steal a kiss.'

Margot was pleased.

'La, la, Seigneur! I keep most of my kisses for my husband; and as for my looks, I am as God made me.'

'I am relieved to find that God had anything to do with it; your countenance doesn't suggest it,' snapped the Seigneur. He glared at her suspiciously from beneath his shaggy brows. 'I can't make it out at all—can't understand it.' He thought for a moment. 'What's all this talk about finding a champion?'

'Jardot can't stand up for himself,' declared Margot, snatching at a passing fire-fly in the rising moonlight. 'Very well, Seigneur, I must find a champion for him.'

She began to sing to the imprisoned fire-fly:

'Sleep, my child, said the old glouglou, to the little one safe in the nest;
When the fire-fly opens and shuts his lamp to stay at home is best,
For the white hibou the air sails through, and the night-hawk cries to her mate,
"Come out and catch me a bird or two before it is late—too late.
Come out, come out, before it is late—too late!"'

She let the fire-fly go, and composedly began to rock herself, the moonlight playing on the steel buckles of her shoes.

'Will you hold your tongue and listen to me?' querulously inquired the Seigneur.

'Hold my tongue! Why, it is shorter than a man's memory,' declared the unabashed Margot. 'Have you forgotten, Seigneur, how you made love to me when Jardot was away in the meadow on the other side of the swamp?'

The Seigneur choked with rage at this startling accusation. Jardot was on his feet in a moment.

'You dared do that!' he cried. 'You dared! If you were not an old man——'

'Well!' The Seigneur recovered himself with an effort. 'If I were not an old man, my dear Monsieur Jardot—Jardot who knuckles under to Father Brunot, and then goes whining to his neighbours about it like a thrashed cur—what would you do?'

'I——'

'"But the little bird creeps out of the nest, and the night-hawk holds her fast,"' crooned Madame Jardot.

Jardot raised his hand to strike the Seigneur. There was a sudden flash of steel in the moonlight, and he found himself confronted by the glistening barrel of a revolver.

'Well?' said the Seigneur quietly. 'Better drop your hand. This little toy can soon upset all your projects.'

Jardot dropped his clenched fist.

'I renounce you! I despise you! Make love to my wife! Bah!'

'All the force of habit. She was the nearest wife to make love to,' said the unabashed Seigneur. 'Go back to your chair, or I'll shoot you.'

Margot got between the two men.

'There, there, put the nasty thing away, Seigneur,' she said, thrusting the revolver into his pocket, 'and I'll give you a kiss without the asking.'

The next moment she pressed her red lips to his, and pushed Jardot, growling, back into his chair.

'You can go now, Seigneur,' she said composedly; 'that was a farewell kiss from us both

We regret that we can have nothing more to do with you. We—we do not approve of your morality.'

The Seigneur bowed.

'I have often wondered whether it is better to enter Paradise for a moment, or to remain for ever outside it,' he said. 'The taste of your lips has revived the question in my mind. Jardot, you are a fortunate fellow.'

'You'll taste my fist some day when you haven't your little gun with you,' ferociously growled Jardot. 'Don't dare come near my wife again, or I'll kill you.'

'Better heed him, Seigneur, for Jardot will probably do as he says,' declared Margot coquettishly. 'You have no idea what a savage he can be when he is roused; and it doesn't take much to rouse him where I am concerned.

'But the little bird creeps out of the nest, and the night-hawk holds her fast,
And the soft wind sighs, and the glouglou cries, "Oh, would that the night were past!"

Farewell, Seigneur. You really should mend your ways before they are past mending. We cast you off.'

The Seigneur walked away through the moonlight. From time to time, a volley of oaths rumbled back as he disappeared. Margot con-

tinued to rock herself on the veranda without noticing Jardot's fierce glance.

Jardot went into the cabane, kissed the baby, came out with his cap and violin.

'Adieu!' he said bitterly. 'I will live in the woods among the wild animals. They are truer to one another than a woman is to her man.'

'La, la, la!' sang Margot. 'What is the matter with me now? Fasten my shoe, Jardot.' She thrust out a coquettish little foot as the moon sailed slowly over the cabane.

'Woman, you have no heart—the disgrace of it—the mother of my children——'

Margot rose rapidly.

'Don't reproach me with that. Had I wished,' she said significantly, 'I might have been the mother of someone else's children. There was the farmer from L'Orient——'

'Fat pig!'

'The avocat—from Fermelin!'

'Weasel—ferret that he was!'

'The captain of the bâteau from Quebec.'

'Drunken——'

'Fasten my shoe, Jardot; it has become unbuckled.'

She sat down again. Jardot thrust his cap on the back of his head and turned away.

'Fasten my shoe, Jardot, angel of my heart!'

'Woman, I will not——'

'Fasten my shoe, dearest, handsomest, sweetest, most amiable Jardot!'

He came close to her.

'For the last time,' he said brokenly. 'The last time! My woman kisses another man. She is not for me. Pouf!'

He knelt down, but his hand shook. She drew him to her in spite of his struggles. 'Bah! great bébé of Bonneville! What is the matter?'

'I am not your plaything, lovely lie that you are. You have kissed the Seigneur dozens of times.'

'La, la, la! Why, I never kissed the man before in my life.'

'Wha-at!'

'I only did it to-night to give you an excuse to quarrel with him. Didn't you see how startled he was?'

With a glad cry, Jardot put his head in her lap. She fondled his curls.

'Now you know how I feel about your yellow woman,' she said softly. 'Go and find her a champion.'

He rose helplessly.

'I had forgotten her. A champion! But where?

'There is the Englishman at the mill,' she said

composedly. 'Anyone can tell that he is unhappy. Give him something to make him happy.'

Jardot stared at her with a frown.

'Perhaps it might make him worse,' he said wisely.

'That is his affair.' She picked up the violin. 'Now play "Le Rossignol," and I will dance to you. I have not danced in the moonlight since the little bébé was born.'

'But the bébé is crying,' he objected, with a smile.

'It will not cry when it hears the music.' She gathered up her skirts.

Jardot began to play, and at the first few liquid notes the child's sobs ceased. Faster and faster grew the music. Through the wild joy of it rang a note of passion, of pain. Margot moved more swiftly, her head thrown back, her red lips parted as she whirled to the other end of the veranda; then, with a flutter of flight-arrested wings, floated toward Jardot, and fell upon his heart.

'Can the yellow woman dance like that?' she panted. 'It is my hour now—mine! mine!'

A night-bird cried in the dusky depths of the pines. Moonshine, starshine, cast silver shadows on the silent earth. The beauty of the night, its solemn distances, its black cedars silhouetted against the mournful mountains, the low, sad

plaint of wailing whip-poor-will and wandering loon filled husband and wife with tremulous awe.

'What does the moonlight mean, b'nhomme?' she whispered, panting like a prisoned bird within his strong arms. 'What does it mean? It gets into my blood, and I dance, dance, dance, but always to thee.'

Her words ended in a little sob of utter content as a star leant down and laid a silver hand upon the little cabane and the sleeping babes within.

VI

THE STRANGER WAKES

EARLY the next morning, Margot made her husband promise not to lose another day in his search for someone to help the mysterious prisoner of the château. The impressionable Jardot longed to undertake the task himself; but his wife, with an intuitive knowledge of the human heart, preferred that someone else should do it. She thought it would be safer, for Jardot had the imagination of a poet, and poets are always more than a little mad. The man in the mill had nothing to do; hence, it was Jardot's duty to find him something wherewith to occupy the hours which hung so heavily upon his idle hands.

'La, la, la!' she said, answering Jardot's appeal for another day in which to think the matter out. 'La, la, la! one-half the world's work is done while the other half's thinking about it. Here's a rose to stick behind your ear, a kiss from myself and the bébé, and off you go. Don't dare to

come back until you have done something, wretched man! What business have you to waste your time in thinking when the good God has given you a wife who can do it so much quicker and better for you!'

'You can't argue with a woman,' grumbled Jardot in answer to this tirade. 'You might as well try to catch thistledown when it blows before the wind.'

'La, la, la! don't waste time, good man. Be off,' said Margot, giving him a friendly little push. 'Don't dare to come back until you have settled matters. Here is the chain. Show him that. Stop kissing me, b'nhomme. There! there! Go, I say. Go!'

She watched Jardot after his protracted farewells reluctantly take the path to the Bush with a stride which grew firmer every moment, caught up a straw hat, and followed after at a safe distance.

'If his courage fails he will have to face me,' she murmured, hushing the baby. 'He dare not do that, little lion. Though he is a brave man, he is not brave enough for that.'

Jardot, quite unconscious that he was being followed, strode on towards the hut, stopping here and there when anything unusual caught his eye. To judge from the dilatory nature of his proceedings, one would have thought that the

Bush was full of interesting novelties. When he had exhausted every available excuse for putting off the evil moment as long as possible (he had not considered it necessary to explain to Margot the many ways in which he had taken advantage of the Stranger's inexperience), he began to whistle cheerily, and banged on the door of the hut, notwithstanding the offended Rube's haughty glance as he moved off covering his harem's retreat.

'You needn't knock the door down; there's one hinge gone already. Who's there?' shouted the Stranger in aggrieved tones.

'Pardon, m'sieu. May I come in?'

'Come in! What for?'

'To see you, m'sieu.'

The Stranger (he was very hot and in his shirt-sleeves) roused himself with an effort.

'To see me! Who are you? What do you want to speak to me about? Can't you see I'm busy and don't wish to be disturbed?'

'M'sieu is perhaps unaware that I am the propriétaire who sold him this beautiful property so expeditiously when m'sieu resolved to renounce the world.'

The Stranger was busily engaged fashioning a chair as Jardot thrust his handsome face into the hut.

'I am delighted to see you, my dear Monsieur Jardot!' he said gravely. 'For some time past, I have been expecting a visit from you. I felt sure that you could not rest content without seeing me.'

'M'sieu does me too much honour.' Jardot came a step within the hut.

'I can't ask you to take a seat.' The Stranger put down his tools. 'There is only half a chair on the premises. You should have waited until I had finished the one on which I am now engaged.'

'It does not matter, m'sieu. I will stand.'

'Better try that log.' The Stranger crossed to the makeshift cupboard, and took out a tattered paper. 'I have long wished for a little private conversation with you, Monsieur Jardot. Your —your methods are so original. With proper training, you would become a great financier. Do you see this document?'

He held the paper within an inch of Jardot's nose. Jardot grinned. The document in question had cost him much anxious thought; it was a masterpiece in its way, but the way was not that of an honest man.

'You do see it! It's long enough for anyone to see half a mile off. Very well. Now, I want to know calmly and dispassionately what you mean by swindling me like this. Forty-seven is the only proper charge in the whole lot. I gather

from it that you have no right to sell her at all.'

Jardot broke into another grin.

'If I could only explain! M'sieu does not understand; he is not sympathetic.'

'Sympathetic! Perhaps you will have the goodness to try to explain, then. Even with your ingenuity, I fancy it will take time to explain this document away.'

Jardot bowed with chastened melancholy. What an ungrateful world it was! He had come to this man as a benefactor, and was being taken to task for an absurd matter of money, a few paltry dollars.

'I hoped m'sieu would let bygones be bygones,' he said, as if that ended the discussion.

'I dare say you did.' The Stranger continued to whittle the leg of the chair he was making. 'I want to know, my dear Monsieur Jardot, why you swindled me.'

'Swindle! M'sieu is harsh. He has no poetry in his soul.'

'Never mind the poetry. I admit that I feel harshly towards you. Why shouldn't I?'

'Oh, m'sieu, if you knew my struggles! Besides, there was Father Brunot's cassock.'

'What's that got to do with it? Why should I pay for Father Brunot's cassock? You have

made enough out of me to pay for fifty cassocks.'

'M'sieu, as I said before, does not understand.'

Jardot, now quite at his ease, drew out a corncob pipe. Without being invited to do so, he filled it from the Stranger's tobacco-pouch, which lay conveniently near on the rough pine table.

The Stranger looked at Jardot; Jardot pleasantly regarded the Stranger. A smile broke over the latter's features, for Jardot's effrontery was magnificent.

'Perhaps, my dear Monsieur Jardot, now that you have added to your other iniquities by stealing my tobacco, you will have the goodness to enlighten me why you took so much trouble to swindle a stranger. You make me feel as if I were in the wrong.'

'All in good time, m'sieu—all in good time. Any mere common person'—Jardot looked round and appropriated a match, which he struck in the customary manner on the seat of his trousers—'any mere common person would have haggled over trifles. It would have been an insult to m'sieu's rank to treat him as if he were a habitant, so that is why I quadrupled the price of everything. Noblesse oblige, m'sieu.'

The Stranger smiled again. Jardot amused him; and it was so long since anything had

amused him. Now that the first keenness of his sorrow began to wear away, he was becoming receptive. Any question of money seemed so remote, of such insignificance, compared with the struggle from which he was emerging. Besides, there was an air of pleasant camaraderie, of joyous rascality, about Jardot. He studied the fellow attentively, his frank, laughing eyes, his strong, aquiline nose, sensuous lips, and curling dark hair.

'What do you come worrying me about?' he asked. 'Do you want more money? You look happy enough.'

Jardot, who had succeeded in lighting his pipe, rose with an injured air.

'M'sieu is wealthy, and does not allow for the necessities of a poor man. Besides, I wanted a silk dress for Margot. She was not the best-dressed woman at Mass since my reconciliation with Father Brunot, and it annoyed me. I could not fail in my duty to so good and beautiful a woman. Now, perhaps, m'sieu will sympathize with me.'

'Oh-h! I beg your pardon. Sit down again. Perhaps I have underrated the nobility of the motives which actuated you. You were about to say, my dear sir, that you considered it your duty to swindle me, firstly because of my rank, and

secondly because you wished to purchase a silk dress for "Margot." It grieves me, Monsieur Jardot, to see a man of your evident intelligence falling into the pit in so commonplace a manner. But you are not the first man who has bartered his honour to please a woman.'

Jardot laughed with a genial roar which shook his sinewy frame.

'It is evident that m'sieu does not know Margot, or he would understand many things of which he is now ignorant. Nom de pipe, she sometimes makes me even understand myself when I'm dreaming about the wind in the tree-tops and the birds and the flowers. I shall be charmed to introduce m'sieu, and m'sieu will be charmed in his turn. After he has seen Margot, he will not think of money.'

The Stranger finished shaving one leg of the chair, and thoughtfully fitted it into the seat.

'I thank you—hand me that hammer, please—for your courtesy, but I would rather provide the lady in question with another silk dress than have the pleasure of knowing her. She might bring an additional list of fixtures with her. Who did you say she was?'

'It is evident that m'sieu speaks in ignorance. Jardot drew himself up proudly. 'Margot is my

wife. She is more beautiful even than the yellow woman.'

The Stranger let the chair drop.

'My dear Monsieur Jardot, you speak in riddles. I have not the remotest idea of what you mean by the "yellow woman," but I apologize for my remarks with reference to madame. A man owes it to his own intellect to resent a sneer levelled at his wife, for it shows him what a fool he must be to have married a woman at whom it is possible for anyone to sneer. You follow me?'

'If,' said Jardot gravely, 'M'sieu does not understand that Margot is the dearest woman in the world, there can be no question of friendship between us.'

'Friendship! So you came to offer me your friendship! Is it for what you can make out of me?'

Jardot's lip quivered; he turned away.

'I trusted to m'sieu's sympathy. M'sieu has insulted me. It is cowardly to talk thus to the victim of circumstances.'

The Stranger appeared to reflect.

'You are right, my dear Monsieur Jardot—you are right. I beg your pardon. Sit down, and don't let your pipe out. I understand that you do me the honour to offer me your friendship. Why, then, did you swindle me?'

'As I said before, m'sieu does not understand.' Jardot sat down again. 'When I imposed upon m'sieu's ignorance in commercial matters, m'sieu was a stranger to me ; one must live ; and Heaven answered my prayers. It was la guerre. Now that I have the privilege of knowing m'sieu and offer him my friendship, it is as if we had smoked the peace-pipe together. Henceforth, I will hold m'sieu's interests dearer than my own. Now does m'sieu understand ?'

The Stranger put down the chair-leg, and stretched out his hand.

'All right, Monsieur Jardot ; I see the point of view. Your code of honour is a little complicated ; but I gather from it that if you had previously offered me your friendship, you would not have swindled me. Is it not so ?'

'M'sieu has put the case in a nutshell ; everything depends upon the point of view. I shall be most happy to protect him from those robbers in Bonneville ; they have no principles.'

'Very well, my dear Jardot—we will drop the Monsieur—understand me. Now that you have explained yourself, I have such confidence in you, that, in future, I must beg you to consider my purse as yours. If you are in difficulties at any time, you will always find a wad of dollar bills in the cupboard there. Help yourself to what you

want, I beg of you. Then I shall feel that we start fair again.'

Jardot was much moved by this proof of the Stranger's confidence in him.

'M'sieu is of a magnanimity enormous, but I do not need his money,' he said proudly. 'I have had enough of it already. M'sieu will allow me the very great privilege of introducing him to Margot? M'sieu will thank me. She is a pearl among women.'

The Stranger looked up with a sudden pang.

'You are married! Are you happy, Jardot? Can you trust your wife?'

'If m'sieu were to see Margot, he would understand: she is the flower of the world. Without her there would be no music, no poetry, no little brown-legged bébés—no sunshine.'

The Stranger sighed.

'Music—poetry—little brown-legged bébés—sunshine! Again I ask, are you happy, Jardot?'

'If m'sieu were to see Margot——'

'Yes, yes.' The Stranger ceased to whittle and absently regarded the roof of the hut. 'You must pardon me if I ask you to defer this introduction for awhile. I—I have had rather a facer lately.'

'That is what Margot said. She was right,' declared Jardot, with conviction.

'Said what?' asked the startled Stranger. 'What does she know about me?'

'Oh, she has seen you wandering through the Bush, looking up at the blue sky, or with your eyes fixed on the ground, talking to yourself. She says you have had a shock—that some woman has behaved badly to you. Women cannot help behaving badly to men, m'sieu. We are the toys for which they cry; and when they have had enough of one particular toy they throw it away, because it is a little damaged, and try another. Then they break that one. Is it not so? One must be a phil——'

The Stranger sprang up.

'Confound it! It is evident that the Bush is getting inconveniently crowded. I'll move on. I did not expect to find myself an object of curiosity to a woman—here!'

He was about to leave the hut, but Jardot laid an arresting hand upon his arm.

'Ah! If m'sieu will only have the goodness to listen a moment! M'sieu is as tumultuous as the Long Sault.'

'Well, what is it? I thought I was free to come and go as I pleased, without being spied upon by a parcel of women.'

'M'sieu forgets that he is young and handsome, and, therefore, that he has no right to hide

himself from any woman. He is a legitimate prey.'

The Stranger, impatiently moving about the hut, filled his pockets with tobacco and a few necessaries.

'My dear Jardot, there is much in what you say. Nevertheless, I am going to move on. Your wife is doubtless a very estimable woman, as women go, but I hate women; they are an invention of the devil, perfected with truly Satanic skill in all the wiles and guiles that work for evil, and it is the one effort of my life to keep away from them. No, no; I must move on.'

'There is Fixture 47; I thought she would be an agreeable surprise for m'sieu,' hazarded Jardot. 'M'sieu does not object to her. Is she a wile of the devil?'

The Stranger turned with his hands full.

'Oh, I don't object to her; but do you know why?'

'No, m'sieu.'

'She is that rare thing, a woman who does not talk; women and peafowl should be for ever silent. I forgive her for being a woman, because her conversational powers are so limited.'

Jardot did not appear to hear him, for there was a sudden swish of feminine garments at the door of the hut, and Margot appeared, the 'p'tit bébé' in her arms.

Margot, though beautiful in the moonlight, was even more alluring, more entrancing, by day. The blood coursed healthily beneath her clear, dark skin, her black eyes sparkled, her white teeth flashed. As she looked entreatingly towards the Stranger, she was the joyous embodiment of a young wife without a care in the world. The Stranger, his pockets bulging, a fierce frown on his brow, remained motionless on the threshold, dumbfounded, overcome by her unexpected appearance, her radiant happiness.

'M'sieu is angry with me? M'sieu does not want to know me, and yet I did so want to know m'sieu.'

A cloud passed over her exquisite beauty, eclipsing, effacing it. She drooped dejectedly, like a broken flower on its stem, then moved away, limply holding the child.

'Come, Jardot, come. We are disgraced.'

'I—I did not know you were there. I—I beg your pardon,' stammered the Stranger. 'I—I am very sorry. People often say things in the heat of the mo——'

'M'sieu forgives us, then?'

With a swift, sudden movement, she turned and thrust the child into his arms. It laughed up into his face, reached out little brown fingers, and tugged at his tawny moustache.

'Come, Jardot, come,' murmured Margot. 'The bébé, pauvre innocent, will not offend m'sieu; the bébé cannot'—she flashed one swift glance at him —'talk.'

At the touch of the child's fingers, a cloudy despair once more seized upon the Stranger's soul. He held the child out to its mother.

'Please take it away. Please——'

'M'sieu does not want to know me, and yet I have longed to know him,' Margot murmured almost inaudibly. 'Come, Jardot, come.'

'I—I—— Won't you take your child?' stammered the Stranger. 'I—I am afraid of dropping it.'

'Dropping it!' Margot turned upon him in quick wrath. 'M'sieu is an Englishman! Ouf! an Englishman! He does not appreciate a woman's greatest gift, the way she tries to be sympathetic to him.' She seized the baby, covered it with kisses. 'P'tit chou—chéri—fleur des anges! Take him, Jardot, and give me the necklace.' She placed the baby in Jardot's arms. 'Give me the necklace and go outside. I am not a talkative woman—not more than—than other women—but I will speak to m'sieu. Thank Heaven, the bon Dieu has given me the power of saying what I mean.'

'But,' objected Jardot, handing her the neck-

lace, 'm'sieu is my friend, not your husband. You can't talk to him as you do to——'

'Outside, I say! Outside, b'nhomme!'

At the imperious stamp of her little foot, Jardot, rendered wise by experience, took the baby and fled.

The Stranger twisted his pipe in embarrassed fingers.

'If I have hurt your feelings I am—sorry. Sometimes trouble makes a perfect brute of a man. Believe me, I thank you for your interest in me—your——'

'Interest in you!' She snapped her pretty brown fingers at him. 'Interest! M'sieu is modest. Bah! m'sieu does not understand.'

He looked helplessly around. Why did this fiery little virago thus break in upon his seclusion? He felt sorry for Jardot.

'Men! men! men!' she cried impatiently. 'M'sieu does not understand. It is for the honour of all women that I would speak to him, and not out of pity for himself.'

'For the honour of all women?'

'Yes, for the honour of all women. M'sieu insults all women.'

'I?—insult all women—I?'

'Yes—you!'

'How?'

'By—by not having anything to do with them. M'sieu is young, handsome, of a melancholy très chic. M'sieu has been badly treated by a woman, and shuts himself up like les hiboux in the barn. It is an insult to all other women that m'sieu does not revenge himself.'

'Revenge! revenge! Hate sinks one low enough without the meaner degradation of revenge. Ah-h! you don't know! you don't know! Will you have the goodness to leave me? You mean well, but I am not accustomed to discuss my private affairs with strangers.'

'With strangers! Ah, yes, m'sieu, I had forgotten. Whose fault is that?' There was a seductive softness in her glance. 'Besides, m'sieu is not a stranger now; he is a neighbour. And when one is unhappy, it is the duty of a neighbour to sympathize.'

'Yes, yes, my good woman, it is very kind of you. I fully appreciate your motives—your—your——'

He broke down helplessly. Would she never go away?

'Oh, well, m'sieu, since you only pretend to understand me, I am going. It makes me sad to see m'sieu unhappy; that he takes no joy in the life which the bon Dieu has given us; that he is overcome by so small a thing as a woman's

caprice. M'sieu should be of a magnanimity more conquering than that.'

'You don't understand. Your husband is waiting for you. Please go away. You ought not to keep him waiting.'

'It is a husband's duty to wait; that is what he is for. M'sieu'—she came to him earnestly, her black eyes wet with tears—'you are grieving your life away. Some woman has wronged you, I know it. Rise above your unhappiness, above your grief, your sorrow. Be a man. You are young, rich, handsome, and yet so poor a thing that you cannot forget the memory of an unhappy love when there is a woman who needs your help.' She thrust the necklace into his hand. 'Look at her! look at her! Isn't she worth helping?'

'A woman who needs my help! I know no——'

'You refuse because you do not know her! What has that to do with it?' she asked with fine scorn. 'Because one woman has wronged you, what right have you to refuse to help another? It is the privilege of any man to help a woman in distress.'

The Stranger dropped the necklace on the table and wearily passed his hand over his forehead.

'Another woman! And I thought I had drifted beyond the reach of all women. Will you be good enough to explain?'

'Oh yes, I will explain. As long as a man lives, he can never drift beyond the reach of women; they are the instruments of the good God for making or marring his soul. Listen to me, m'sieu. Within a mile of you there is a beautiful woman, fair as an angel—not black, like me—a beautiful woman who is oppressed by the Seigneur, and she needs a—champion.'

'A champion! What for? This isn't the age of champions. Why does she want one? What right has he to shut her up?'

'La, la, la! how do I know? But is that any reason for your cowardly conduct? If a woman needs help, has a man any right to ask why? Shouldn't he fly to her, help her just because——'

'Because?'

'Because she is a woman.'

'He might if all women were like you.'

The Stranger was touched by the impetuous little woman's pleading for her sex.

'La, la, la! thank the bon Dieu they are not. I, m'sieu, am a torrent, a whirlwind, an impulse, a shadow passing over the grass and gone as quickly; but I am also a woman. And there is another woman who needs your help. If you

ever hope to obtain forgiveness from the good God yourself, if you have ever sinned—there never yet was a man who hasn't—if you have ever wronged another, if you have ever thought harshly of one whom you once loved, there will be no mercy, no forgiveness, no happiness for you until you take up the burden of others and fight their battles. A woman can hide and mope, and let the days go by; a woman can run away; a woman can weep, and take to her bed, and shut out the sunlight; but a man—a man—— Why, a man should not be weaker than a woman, should not hide himself in the Bush and grieve through the solitary days. If a woman has wronged you, m'sieu, prove to her what she has lost by becoming a man again. Help this prisoner within the château gates. Free her. Ah, m'sieu, in freeing her you will also free yourself from the bondage of your grief. I, a woman, for the sake of the woman who has wronged you, ask you to help a woman. Do not let me ask in vain.' She put the necklace in his hands again. 'See how beautiful she is, how helpless.'

'Do you not ask for your own sake? What is this woman to you?'

'No, not for mine. For hers. She is nothing to me, except that she is a woman, and so beautiful. See, her face is like a flower.'

'But a man who puts himself in the power of an unknown woman for a whim like this is a fool.'

'Eh, bien, m'sieu, I dare say you are right. Some foolishness is better than the wisdom of the wise.'

'Perhaps you are right, and I have made a fool of myself by coming here instead of plunging into the world again. I am tired of shadows. Life is a dream, a mirage, full of misty shapes and forms which do not exist. One loves—the woman fades away; one hates—the hate kills one. Yet all that a man asks from the world is so little. Only—happiness.'

'Eh, bien, m'sieu.' She touched him lightly on the arm. 'Is it so little to be happy? Haven't we to give and take, to love much, forgive much, as we hope to be forgiven? Happiness is a butterfly that settles within our reach unsought. Stretch out a hand to stay it, and, pouf! it has flown away. If you thank the good God for living, happiness will come to you. It will only come through something you have done to others —something which has made them happy. Then the good God passes on the happiness to the creator of it. I,' she added simply, 'was very unhappy until I tried to make Jardot happy. At first, I did not understand how to manage a poet. When he looked at a woman because she

was beautiful, I thought he loved her; I reproached him, and tore his hair out by the roots. Now, when he raves of a pretty face, I take his hand and laugh, and he knows that I know, and have no fear. And then, m'sieu, there are the little brown bébés to—to remind him.'

'Yes, we cannot all be as fortunate as Jardot. How about the man who has no "little brown bébés" to—to remind him?'

She smiled, the traces of tears still in her sparkling black eyes.

'Ah well, m'sieu, they come like the butterflies. One doesn't think of them till they nestle beneath one's heart, and grow dearer day by day. Happiness takes different forms, and bébés are like butterflies, only they do not fly away. If you save this woman from the troubles which beset her, happiness will come to you also, m'sieu. She has a good face, m'sieu—a face unspotted by the world.'

He gazed wearily down upon her as she laid her little brown hand upon her heart.

'If all women were like you, it would be needless to appeal to a man's chivalry; if all women were like you, there would be fewer men like me—men who have lost their manhood—men who have no right to live. For your sake, I will help this unknown woman!'

He picked up the necklace and looked at it musingly.

'No, no, not for mine. For hers,' she insisted.

He feared to make himself ridiculous, and turned away in sudden anger.

Margot wiped her eyes.

'La, la, la!' she laughed. 'At last, m'sieu, I have stung you into being a man again. There! there! m'sieu will forgive the woman who—talks. A man can use a sword, but a woman has only her tongue. The rest I leave to you and Jardot. M'sieu will do well to remember that if one woman does harm in the world, there is always another woman to put it right again.'

And she tripped lightly away, hanging on to Jardot's arm, the baby stretching out its little hands to her with a crow of delight.

Left alone, the Stranger remained buried in a bitter reverie. When he looked up, Fixture 47 stood within a yard of him, a curious expression in her blue eyes, as if she were gazing into his soul.

The Stranger hastily thrust the necklace into his breast-pocket.

'Ah, Forty-seven,' he said, 'a woman stung me into coming here; another woman stings me into the world again: which is committing the greater crime? From to-day I will put off my

brooding dreams, help to free this woman; then—why, then I shall probably make a bigger fool of myself than ever Nature intended me to be, and Fate will decide what next. Meantime, even a cumberer of the ground must eat. Let us dine. Though a man be broken-hearted, he must still eat. That's the bathos of it—the silliness of it. Forty-seven, I'm a fool; you're a fool—it is a world of fools. Sometimes, Forty-seven, I think I'm the biggest fool of all in this big world of fools. Now I must feed those infernal chickens, or they'll be sure of it.'

VII

THE NECKLACE

The Seigneur felt that he deserved sympathy, for his lot had fallen in thorny places. Nothing short of physical violence, the bare possibility of which was absurd in this matter-of-fact twentieth century, would have any effect upon his ward. All his heroics, threats, entreaties, protestations, were met by an enigmatic smile, a curl of that cupid's bow, her curved upper lip, and a glance from blue eyes which, somehow, brought home to him, without the shadow of a doubt, how poorly Nature had equipped him for the rôle of a successful villain. He began to grow suspicious, to feel that he had underrated Elise's intelligence.

In despair, he declared that he would drag her to the altar willy-nilly. Elise laughed, and said that people did not do these things nowadays. When the Seigneur demanded what she meant by such an enigmatical phrase, she told him that

she had seen it in a book of plays lent to her by a school friend. The Seigneur, waxing indignant, informed her that such pernicious sayings ought not to be put into the hands of demoiselles. They were, he asserted, so capable of misinterpretation by innocent young minds not versed in the ways of the world. Whereupon Elise again laughed at him and ran away, declaring that the Seigneur himself was more dangerous than all the books that had ever been written.

It happened, too, at this juncture that the Seigneur's presence was occasionally needed in Ottawa. He excused himself to Elise for his absence under the plea of 'affairs,' and she, only too glad to be rid of his obnoxious attentions, gave no further heed to the matter. Life itself, without her frequent visits à l'Indienne to the hut, would have been monotonously dreary, for day after day went by with little or no variation. She breakfasted alone, lunched with the Seigneur when he happened to be in the château, and dined with him in the evening. She had brought many pretty dresses with her from Paris, and wore them prettily, the Seigneur sitting opposite her in evening dress which was redeemed from hopeless modernity by a protuberant frill like the back fin of a perch. Sometimes, she shivered as he gazed at her from beneath his penthouse

brows, and made haste to leave him when the ruddy glow of his rubicund nose betokened that he had been drinking heavily. But the restraint of sitting opposite a lady made him appear to better advantage than at lunch, when he was generally morose and headachy. In his time the Seigneur had done and seen many things. Judiciously edited and embellished, he retailed some of these doings to Elise. Like all roués, he had no mind that his future wife should be other than spotless, and, in spite of his villainy, would rather have cut out his tongue than have uttered things in her presence unmeet for ladies.

Notwithstanding his designs upon Elise, as they sat in the old drawing-room, with its heavily-framed portraits of dead and gone De Bonnevilles looking affectedly down upon them, the Seigneur found the tête-à-tête rather slow. When he sought to divert the conversation into personal channels, Elise dexterously drew his attention to the family heirlooms, and displayed so intense an interest in them that the Seigneur began to wish himself a man without either family or traditions. He reluctantly came to the conclusion that the ingénue was an overrated person—a person who was more interesting on the stage than in real life. On the stage, the ingénue sparkled; off it, she frowned and preserved an uninteresting

silence. Still, this particular ingénue had money —money which he badly needed for the pursuit of those elegant follies and dissipations which had marred his weak, self-indulgent life. Sometimes, as he sat looking at the girl or listening to the plaintive melodies she drew from the cracked old spinet, he found himself a younger, better man—a man who had not smirched himself—a man who still relished the simple outdoor life of a Canadian seigneur with all its homely duties and responsibilities.

But the feeling was momentary. Threats of foreclosure by the mortgagees loomed ominously before him. Stacks of bills were piled upon the table in his study. He knew by instinct what they were, and left them unopened, to accumulate day by day. He knew, too, that all his specious story to Elise about her money was false. Her interests had been too well guarded by her father for even the Seigneur to be able to squander her heritage. It was all carefully invested, and accumulating with a rapidity which made the Seigneur's mouth water. Elise was a great heiress, and she must marry him. His scheme of isolating her had not proved a success. Occasionally, in spite of his desire for her money, he could not help wishing that she might slip through his fingers. He was terrified by the

prospect of an interminable succession of dull, decorous evenings in the gloomy old drawing-room, with its moth-eaten tapestries and polished floors, its lapis-lazuli tables and works of art, its quaint cabinets and curios from every corner of the world. His blood was too old for her voice to thrill him, his wit belonged to a school with which she was, happily, unfamiliar; and, though she talked to the great dogs which lay at her feet, and made much of them, she never vouchsafed him a word when it was possible to ignore his presence.

Such a demeanour augured ill for his future happiness when he should have prevailed upon her to become the lady of the château.

One evening, Elise came down to dinner in a black dress powdered over with little glittering points of light which caught the Seigneur's avid eyes as he lay back in his chair. After dinner, when she had gone to the tinkling old spinet, and was crooning little songs to herself, the dogs lying at her feet, he surveyed her with æsthetic satisfaction.

'If I might be permitted to criticise,' he said, with a bow, 'your white throat would look even whiter encircled by that necklace you have given up wearing.'

He had spoken the words without any after-

thought, and was surprised to see the vivid blush which dyed her cheeks. With an effort, she went on singing as if he had not spoken. He strode over to her.

'I repeat, mademoiselle, it is my wish that you wear the necklace with its miniature reproductions of your own fair face.'

'And,' she said coldly, 'if I decline to allow you to dictate to me as to what I shall wear?'

'Then I shall assume'—he gazed down upon her evident distress with malicious satisfaction—'then I shall assume that you have either lost the necklace or'—he paused to see the effect of his words upon her—'have given it away.'

'Lost it!—given it away!'

'I will repeat the words if you wish.'

'N-no; it is not necessary. Only, I do not acknowledge your right to dictate to me in any way.'

'No, of course not; but you will soon.'

And he strolled out of the low French window, leaving her to gaze after him in indignant astonishment.

The Seigneur, staying on the lawn for a moment, vainly listened for a continuation of Elise's song.

'I thought not,' he said, flicking away a fire-fly which had settled upon his frilled shirt. 'No, I

thought not. I have silenced my singing bird for this evening. An arrow drawn at a venture sometimes hits the mark. Her mother left the girl several quaint rings, but she has only one necklace. When I made that chance remark about it she seemed upset, almost frightened. Now, I should very much like to know what has become of that necklace. Either she has lost it or given it away. This must be looked into.'

He strolled along, enjoying a somewhat full-flavoured cigar. The Seigneur's conscience and his tobacco were alike devoid of the finer qualities. Suddenly, he remembered Jardot's confusion when he had crept up to his cabane and heard some vague talk about a champion. Was it possible that Elise had interested Jardot in her affairs? It might be, for anything was possible to a romantic fool like Jardot. But no, there was Margot; and from what the Seigneur knew of Margot he was perfectly aware that Jardot's shrift would be short indeed should he give her either real or imaginary cause for jealousy. 'A champion! a champion!' He took the cigar out of his mouth as he walked past Jardot's and strolled onward. If Jardot would only stop that accursed fiddling, he could think more clearly. But there lolled Jardot on the veranda, with Margot in a rocking-chair at his side, his violin wailing like a lost spirit through

the sweet softness of the summer night. If he turned back, Jardot would think he was afraid of him. No, he would not turn back. His feet insensibly moved into the track leading to the old mill, and he passed the Jardots with an indifference too real to be natural.

His annoyance was not lessened by Margot's ringing laughter. Margot was a handsome woman, and the Seigneur admired all handsome women so much that it galled him to be the butt of one. Why not make friends with her and Jardot?

Another ringing laugh from Margot decided him that the time was not yet ripe for friendly overtures. Pooh! What were they that he should bother his head about them? Nothing but miserable peasants, who did not approve of his morality, or said that they did not approve of it. For the matter of that, he did not approve of it himself, only it was too late to change it now, and circumstances seemed to be making it rather worse instead of better. No; he would not be friends with the Jardots. They were beneath his anger or contempt. In the old days, in sunny France, he would have set them both dangling from the nearest tree. Truly, modern civilization, with its absurd curtailment of feudal privileges, had much to answer for.

He strolled onward through the solemn Bush, the moonlight casting dark shadows on his path, and could not help sighing to think that he was alone.

'That reminds me,' he said, suddenly halting and looking round; 'I must be near the mill. Didn't I hear something about a fool of an Englishman who has taken up his quarters there? Most Englishmen are mad; this one seems to be a solitary kind of imbecile.'

He sauntered on, dismissing the Englishman from his mind.

'Probably some crazy fool who is in hiding. It might amuse me to hunt him up and find out what he has done. He wouldn't be here in the solitary Bush, leading the life of a recluse, if he hadn't done something for which he is "wanted." It's hot enough for another thunderstorm. Fancy a man being idiot enough to lead a solitary life here when he might just as well be in Paris. Paris! Ah-h! What have I done to be exiled from Paris and forced to woo a puling, bread-and-butter schoolgirl? That is more than a sufficient punishment for any little peccadilloes of which I may have been guilty. How unjust the world is! Give me Paris and an income, and I'd never be harsh to anyone.'

The path was so well worn that he had no diffi-

culty in following it. He did not feel inclined to return to Elise ; the moonlight was a more soothing influence.

'I'll just look up this recluse, if possible, without being seen, and discover what he is like. It will amuse me. Heaven knows there is not much to amuse one in a place like this !'

He stepped softly along in the quick-breathing darkness, and brushed aside the interlacing boughs until the faint babble of the mill-stream fell upon his ears. When he emerged into the open glade he complimented the recluse on his selection of so pretty a spot with its murmuring stream and surrounding trees.

The little hut lay open to the moonlight. A shrill inquiring neigh came from the broncho's stable, the stamp of a restless hoof. Then all was quiet again, and the Seigneur strolled into the open to look at the hut.

'Pity the place isn't mine,' he murmured. 'It wouldn't cost much to clear away these ruins and build a little châlet here.' He smiled evilly. 'I do not think it would have to wait long for a tenant. Human nature is much the same here as it is in Paris.'

Throwing away his cigar, he moved onward to the hut.

'I'll ask for a light,' he said, drawing out a

fresh cigar. 'The fellow can't turn me out for a moment. That will give me a chance to see if there is anything suspicious about him.'

When the Seigneur reached the hut door, he found that it was wide open. A young man lay sleeping on the floor, his head pillowed upon a brilliantly-striped Mackinaw blanket. His shirt-collar showed where the sunburned skin ended and the white chest began. Something glittered upon his throat.

The Seigneur was interested.

'Curious! I've heard of a man wearing a bangle, but never a necklace. I'll get a look at it. It's easy to make an excuse if he wakes up.'

Dropping upon his knees, the Seigneur wormed himself towards the sleeping man. Something within a foot of him gave a sleepy croak, hopped away, then went to sleep again. It was Rube.

The Seigneur grinned sardonically.

'Seems to have plenty of outposts. Must get a look at the fellow. I only hope that cursed rooster won't wake him up.'

He remained still for a couple of minutes, watching the sleeper, whose chest rose and fell easily. It was evident from his rhythmical breathing that he was tired out after a long day in the Bush.

Inch by inch the Seigneur, who had been a

good stalker in his younger days, drew near to the Stranger. The moon, reaching its zenith, shone more fully into the hut, and, with a smothered oath, the Seigneur recognised Elise's necklace upon the man's throat.

He turned pale with passion.

'So, a new danger,' he murmured. 'This is evidently the champion. And to think that girl is only just out of a convent! What will she be like when she is five years older?'

He conceived an added respect for Elise. This, then, was the reason for her seeming indifference to his threats. She relied upon this young fellow to help her. He would match cunning with cunning. Sh-s-sh! The Stranger moved in his sleep.

The Seigneur backed into the shadow without disturbing Rube. Another shrill neigh from the stable warned him that the broncho was on the alert, and that he had better leave the hut.

With difficulty the Seigneur repressed a cry of satisfaction, for, on the Stranger's turning over, the clasp of the necklace became unfastened, and it slid slowly to the floor.

A moment later the Seigneur reached the outside of the hut with the necklace in his pocket, and hurriedly sought cover.

'He has been after no good, the old loup-garou,'

growled Jardot on seeing the Seigneur pass the cabane. 'He struts as if he had won a victory. I am more than ever glad I've told him what we thought of his morals.'

On his arrival at the veranda of the château, a thump-thump of tails from the dogs greeted the Seigneur. He was just about to pass noiselessly inside, when he saw Elise asleep in a rocking-chair.

'What a sleepy world it is!' he grinned. 'All these young lovers seem to dream in the moonlight. How pretty and innocent she looks!—as innocent as a snake. I've half a mind to kiss——'

But something in the girl's attitude, the quiet breathing, the fair cheek resting upon her white hand, touched him with shame. There were traces of tears on her long lashes, too.

'That will come later,' he murmured irresolutely. 'Meanwhile——'

He softly dropped the necklace on her lap and entered the house, picturing Elise's dismay when she awoke.

'I don't think I'd like to stand in the champion's shoes,' he chuckled, going up to his own room. 'She will think that he has returned her gage d'amour.'

Half an hour later Elise awoke. The hand upon which her cheek had been resting fell into

her lap and touched something hard. She gave a little cry.

'That's right,' chuckled the Seigneur in the distance; 'it's ever so much better than killing him, or any nonsense of that sort. The poison's beginning to work. I fancy this would-be champion is already done for. There's nothing a foolish girl dislikes so much as being made to look as foolish as she really is. A good night's work—a very good night's work! Now it is my turn to go to sleep.'

VIII

THE SEIGNEUR'S DISCOVERY

EARLY next morning the Stranger awoke, stretched himself, yawned, rose on his elbow, and nodded familiarly to Rube, who strutted up to the doorway with truculent pomp. The sun glinted downward through the trees; there was a pleasant freshness from the west wind blowing in at the open door. From the nearest stump a robin flung out a musical challenge to Rube, which was promptly taken up by that irascible chanticleer and repeated until the echoes rang. Pleasantly babbled the little mill-stream with an inviting suggestion of coolness before the penetrating heat of summer invaded the glade. The Stranger felt almost happy as he got up and paddled about the floor of the hut in his bare feet. Since there was no sign of Fixture 47, he busied himself in preparing a frugal meal. Of late he had scarcely seen that erratic and taciturn damsel. She came and went as she pleased, and, from motives of

politeness, the Stranger did not seek to follow her trail. Sometimes it did occur to him that there were no traces of an Indian encampment in the immediate vicinity of the hut. Perhaps her own people were a day or two's journey distant, and that accounted for the increasing brevity of Fixture 47's visits. Once or twice he had offered her money, only to be met with a musical, disdainful grunt.

It rather worried the Stranger that he could make Fixture 47 no return for her services, inefficient though they generally were. Somehow he found her presence soothing. The shy, retiring grace of her movements, her reserve, her silence, were grateful to him. Never loquacious, she was always picturesque, though the longer she stayed with him the more she seemed to consider it necessary to envelop her head in an all-comprehensive, all-concealing blanket. He began to think that he would like to see her without the blanket, sketch her upright, willowy form, perpetuate her blue eyes on canvas; but he never got any further than idly imagining that he would some day write to Montreal for sketching materials. There was plenty of time; he had all the weeks and the months before him. To bring a new element into his life, to vary the grateful monotony of his day, would be to invest it with fresh unrest.

Often the Stranger wandered through the Bush beneath the pale starlight, drinking in the dewy air, the healing odour of the pines, trying to reach up to the God of Silence, striving to comprehend, to bear, the misery which had come to him, to understand the anguish of betrayal, the death of the woman he had loved. It was this insurmountable barrier of death which made him pause blankly in his attempts to grapple with the problem she had left for him to solve. What was the message which had not been given to him? He roamed for miles fighting with the futility of his fate, the impossibility of forgetting, the anguish of it all. He wanted to reconstruct his life, to put the past behind him, to get away from his pain.

His pain! With all a man's innate selfishness, it was always his own pain of which he thought. It never occurred to him that the reason for his being forsaken might possibly have arisen in himself; that Madeleine Ivry might have discovered something in which he was lacking—something which had prompted her treachery; that she had gradually probed the depths of his nature; in despair had renounced him; had sought to heal her disappointment, her disillusion, by the aid of some other man. Mercifully, perhaps, death had come to save her from the bitterness of such a struggle, and he (the man) had been left to recon-

struct his life as best he might. The very need of sympathy to lighten his own desolate days should have taught him that no man can live alone, for self, make an idol of his own heart. And so he stilled his hungry craving for love, affection, sympathy, with the society of the animals and the birds around him. To them, he was a beneficent providence, feeding them, healing their hurts when they preyed on one another, unconsciously helping himself to bear the burden of his barren days. To his unrest, his passionate craving, his wild anguish, there succeeded a stony calm, an attitude of waiting for some crisis which would either kill him or remove the sorrow which was eating away his life. There hung a shadow over everything he did—a shadow which he could not thrust away. In the busy haunts of men the shadow had been greater. Here, at times, it lifted, only to return in the blackness of the night, when the winds whistled in the hollows of the hills and a great fear lay upon the world—that mysterious fear which comes to us all ere the dawning day, chokes our breathing, stills the beating of our hearts, then passes as quickly as it came.

But there was no shadow, no fear, in the sunlight. The Stranger pottered about the hut looking for matches, then came out, lit a fire, and

filled his kettle at the stream. When he had hung it from a forked stick, he fetched his coffee-pot and frying-pan, and mixed himself some Indian corn-cake with an earnestness which admitted of no distracting influence. Sometimes he loathed himself for this minute attention to the preparation of his food, but Nature gave him a healthy appetite—an appetite which would not be denied. In short, although he knew it not, Mother Nature had taken this spoiled child to her maternal breast, and was slowly making him whole again, perhaps teaching him a salutary lesson in the making.

When the Stranger had finished his preliminary preparations for breakfast, he went down to the stream, flung off his clothes, stood erect upon the edge, and dived in.

Rube, who followed him down to the brink to protest against the Stranger's arbitrary appropriation of half a dozen eggs from which Mrs. Rube No. 3 one day hoped to raise a family, looked on with curiosity. Presently, crumbs would fall from the rich man's table. Therefore it behoved Rube to feign a polite and anxious interest in the Stranger's movements, so that the transition from scenery to food might come about naturally, without any unseemly abruptness.

The Stranger emerged from the stream and

ran up and down to dry himself. All at once, he paused and uttered an exclamation which frightened the robin on the stump and caused it to fly away. To Rube's ill-concealed annoyance, he again plunged into the stream, and swam slowly up and down as if looking for something.

When he came out again he was preoccupied, thoughtful, and repulsed Rube's ostentatious advances. Growing indignant, Rube helped himself to some bread, and strutted off to the broncho to complain of the Stranger's lack of consideration for his feathered friends.

The broncho, with a dexterous twist, slipped his halter and came out to see what was the matter. His sympathetic muzzle roused the Stranger from his abstraction.

'What on earth am I to do?' he murmured vacantly. 'I can't have lost the thing. I remember putting it round my neck for safety last night; someone must have stolen it from me.'

He went into the hut and made a comprehensive search, then came back and pushed away his untasted breakfast.

'I remember,' he said to the broncho, 'hearing you neigh. I ought to have got up. You never neigh unless there is someone about.'

But the problem was too hard for the broncho.

He cropped the grass, and went down to the stream to drink his fill.

Three hours later, while the Stranger was still vainly endeavouring to find out what had become of the necklace, he was roused from his moody abstraction by the unexpected appearance of Fixture 47, who sat down on the other side of the fire, after greeting him with her customary musical grunt. As she did so, a horrible suspicion seized the Stranger, and made his heart sick within him. Fixture 47 was the only person who came at will to the hut. Probably she had all an Indian's love for finery. Prowling round the hut, she must have noticed the necklace, and, with noiseless dexterity, had taken it from him while he slept.

Aghast at the thought, the Stranger groaned. Here was another complication in his quiet life. Yesterday he liked, respected, trusted Fixture 47, felt sorry for the mystery of her lonely life. Now she had betrayed his trust, had killed his belief in her. Was it to be always thus? With an angry gesture, he reached over to Fixture 47, pulled her blanket aside, and, as he expected, saw the necklace shining upon her exquisite throat.

Fixture 47 sprang to her feet, indignant, quivering, and hastily drew the blanket round her.

'Go!' he thundered. 'You have betrayed my trust in you—have stolen my necklace. Never let me see your face again.'

For a moment her blue eyes, so strangely unlike an Indian's, filled with tears. With a proud gesture, she tore off the necklace, threw it at his feet, and turned away.

'Stay!' The Stranger rushed into the hut, came back with a wad of dollar bills, and thrust them into her little hands. 'If I spoke harshly to you, I'm sorry. I ought to have known what a temptation it would be to you. It doesn't matter—not really. You're only a woman; but I—I liked you, Forty-seven; I believed in you. Now you've killed my belief all for the sake of that infernal thing. Take this money and go back to your people. I'll have nothing more to do with you. You are a disappointment like everything else.'

An angry tear ran down Fixture 47's cheek, although she did her best to hide it, as she threw the money back to him with a haughty gesture. Rube, an interested spectator of the scene, promptly proceeded to peck holes in one of the five-dollar bills.

The Stranger, overcome by Fixture 47's evident distress, did not know what to do.

'I'm sorry,' he said, 'but can't you see, can't

you understand, you've made it impossible for me to receive you here again? But, in spite of that, if I can do anything to serve you I shall be only too glad.' His voice choked. 'Oh, Forty-seven, you, too!'

He turned away. Here was another crushing disappointment, just as he was beginning to take a renewed interest in life.

When he looked round the squaw was still there, and the necklace lay between them where she had thrown it. Rube, attracted by its glittering surface, pecked at it viciously, and ran his beak along the edges.

The Stranger put out his hand.

'Forgive me for being angry, Forty-seven; forget it. You were the first to welcome me here. You should have had a necklace and welcome. I'd have got you half a dozen had I known you cared for them; but—but you can't have this one.'

Even in the depths of her blanket, he could see the indignant flash of Fixture 47's blue eyes. She made an effort to control herself, then flung concealment to the winds.

'I hate you!' she cried passionately. 'I despise you! How dare you pretend to believe that I stole my own necklace! How dare you!'

The Stranger staggered back.

'Your—own—necklace!' he muttered feebly. 'Merciful heavens! am I mad? Who are you?'

'Who am I?' she cried, with angry contempt. 'What can it matter to you, since you affect to think so meanly of me? Where have you seen this necklace before? I thought you were a gentleman.'

The thunderstruck Stranger recoiled still further.

'Madame Jardot gave it to me,' he said feebly. 'I—I was to be a—champion.'

'You! A champion! And you insult a helpless woman by doubting her! How dared you touch me?'

She towered to her full height.

The Stranger collected himself with an effort.

'I—I thought you were an Indian,' he said lamely.

'As if that were any excuse! I thought you were a gentleman, or I would never have trusted myself here,' she said; but there was a quaver in her voice.

He stood bareheaded before her.

'Believe me—I speak most earnestly and truthfully—from the bottom of my soul—believe me, I had no idea that you were the Lady of the Château. I thought that you were simply a poor Indian girl who needed food and shelter, and

tried to be kind to you without seeming obtrusive.'

'That is no excu——'

'Please listen to me for a moment. Please do. Only yesterday the Jardots came to me, brought me the necklace. I was thinking how best to serve you—how——'

'Was that why you brought it back to me?' she asked scornfully. 'I thought that they had given up all idea of helping me. I would have appealed to your generosity to help me in a little while, only I wanted to be sure of you—to feel that the courtesy you had extended to even an Indian squaw would also be granted to an unhappy girl who is persecuted by the wickedest old man in the world. Why did you bring the necklace back to me? Are you a coward?'

'I—bring the necklace—back to you!'

'Yes. Do not echo my words. I must have fallen asleep on the veranda last night. When I awoke, the necklace was upon my lap. You are condemned out of your own mouth. If the Jardots gave it you, you must have brought it back.'

'I can assure you nothing was further from my thoughts. As I had no better place in which to guard it, I went to sleep with the necklace clasped round my throat for safety. When I awoke, it

was gone. I—I—pardon me, I thought you had taken it during the night, and had come back this morning in order to divert suspicion from yourself. That was why I pulled the blanket aside. You did not come, then?'

'I! In the night! You forget yourself.' There was a rush of blood to her tawny cheeks. 'Has there been anything in my conduct to lead you to believe——'

'But—— Oh! this is maddening—— I thought that you were an Indian, and that you wanted the necklace. As I said just now, the Jardots told me your story, gave me the necklace, and I pledged myself to come to your rescue. When I fell asleep last night, the necklace was fastened round my throat for safety.'

'Oh, monsieur, do not expect me to believe you. This is incredible.'

'It is the truth,' he said emphatically. 'Strange as it may seem, the necklace was round my throat. When I awoke this morning, it had disappeared. It suddenly occurred to me that you had taken it. That is why I snatched your blanket aside——'

She hastily drew it still closer, and stared at him blankly.

'Who can have taken it?'

'Jardot?'

'No; he is devoted to me.'

'His wife?'

'No. Why should she?'

'Perhaps she feared—was jeal——' he said lamely.

'Jealous!' He could have sworn that she blushed beneath the pigment. 'Oh no. Besides, the dogs—they would have torn her to pieces. They know Jardot. There is only one person they would permit to come and go, and that is——'

'And that is?'

'The Seigneur.'

'The—Seigneur!'

'Yes, the Seigneur.'

The Stranger was stupefied.

'But how could he know? How could he suspect?'

'He evidently does know. Treacherous people always suspect others. The Seigneur noticed that I was not wearing the necklace, and asked me about it after dinner last night. He may have come down here to make your acquaintance.'

'I see—I see. I went to sleep early. I was very tired. Slept heavily. The door was open. He knows the necklace?'

'Of course he does.'

The Stranger picked it up and put it in his pocket.

'Kindly return it to me,' said Elise. 'I was wrong, unhappy girl that I am, to look for any kindness in the world. I will run away to Montreal, tell my story to the good Fathers there. They will help me.'

She held out her hand for the necklace, but the Stranger did not offer to give it to her.

'Mademoiselle,' he said slowly, 'I have only just realized the touching confidence you placed in me by entrusting yourself to my poor hospitality. Pardon me for my seeming rudeness in my attempt to recover the necklace, but it had appealed to me, and I was grieved to lose it. If you will allow me to retain it, I will never rest day or night until I have released you from your present invidious position.'

She hesitated.

'But you hate all women. That is why I hesitated. Why did Jardot come to you?'

'I know not. If I have said things about your sex which I ought not to have said, believe me, I only did so because I thought that you did not understand, and that I was, practically, alone.'

'Ah, monsieur,' she interrupted, 'it is easy to understand when a man speaks evil of a woman. I have learned that much from the Seigneur. And you! Since I have had the honour' (there

was a sarcastic emphasis on the word 'honour') —'since I have had the honour of knowing you, you have never spoken anything else but evil of all women.'

He bowed his head in shame. For the moment he almost hated her because she had penetrated to his inmost soul, had heard his wild and bitter words.

'Pardon me,' he said mournfully, 'if you have not stolen the necklace from me, you have stolen my secret—the secret which brought me to the solitude and seclusion of this place.'

The broncho gave a vicious snort and wheeled in the direction of the footpath.

'There is someone coming,' said the girl hastily.

The Stranger made a dash at the broncho and held him back, as a tall form emerged from the Bush.

'It is the Seigneur,' murmured the girl under her breath. 'He must not see me here. Take care. The broncho knows that he must have been last night's thief.'

The Seigneur strolled leisurely forward, and lifted his hat with stately courtesy.

'Vicious little beast that pony of yours,' he said, with a bow. 'Really, monsieur, it is difficult to have the pleasure of making your acquaintance while he is so excited.'

The Stranger succeeded in quieting the broncho,

and hastily led him into the stable. Then he came back again.

'To whom have I the honour of speaking?' he asked, unconsciously adopting the manners of the civilized world.

'I,' said the Seigneur, knocking off the tops of the tall grasses with his tasselled cane, 'am the Seigneur.'

'The Seigneur! There must be some mistake. I am afraid that I do not understand.'

'De Bonneville,' explained the Seigneur.

'But if I understand aright,' protested the Stranger, 'this place is not included in the seigneurie?'

The Seigneur bowed again.

'A delicate hint. One would almost imagine, monsieur, that you do not desire the pleasure of my company.'

'And in that case'—the Stranger bowed with equal politeness—'one would imagine correctly, monsieur.'

The Seigneur bowed again and looked significantly at the blanket-muffled figure of the soi-disant squaw.

'You have a very good reason for wishing to be alone. Permit me, monsieur, to see whether you are justified by a pretty face in preferring the lady's society to mine.'

He moved towards the squaw as if to pull off her blanket, but the Stranger stood before him.

'Come a step nearer, and I'll hurl you into the stream,' he said quietly.

The Seigneur drew a small revolver from his pocket.

'Stand aside, or I shoot.'

He could not understand the flash of exaltation which leaped from the Stranger's eyes. Here was a brilliant ending to all his difficulties, his vain attempts to solve the problem of life.

'Of course,' he said quietly, 'if you wish to shoot an unarmed man, I can't stop you.'

'Then stand aside. I either see the squaw's face or I fire.'

'Then—fire!'

'Don't be melodramatic,' said the Seigneur testily. 'I'll count five. If you don't stand aside when I reach five, you will have looked your last upon the sun.'

The Stranger disdained to reply, but motioned to Elise to keep behind him.

'Very well, then. One—two—three—four—fi—— Ah! I thought so!'

The Seigneur lowered his pistol.

Elise sprang in front of the Stranger, blanket thrown aside, cheeks glowing with shame.

'I thought I recognised that blanket,' said the Seigneur coolly. 'Mademoiselle de Marsac, have the goodness to take my arm, or I will blow your fool of a lover's brains out. With your permission, we will continue our walk.'

He offered her his arm, and she, after one long, steadfast look at the Stranger, touched it with her finger-tips.

'As I was saying to you last night——' affably began the Seigneur; and the Stranger found himself regarding their vanishing forms with a stupefied air.

IX

THE VISITOR

THE Seigneur chatted cheerfully to Elise, pointing out the natural beauties of his domain, the sunlight on the river, the squirrels playing in the trees, the tasselled stems of Indian corn. Perhaps, he said, she could enlighten him why, if a tract of Bush were burned down, a growth of different trees immediately sprang up there. Elise could not enlighten him, and he seemed pained but not surprised at her ignorance. She, on the other hand, was astonished to discover the extent of his information with regard to the habits of even such insignificant animals as ground-hogs and chipmunks. From the recesses of her blanket, she observed without being seen the serenity of his countenance, the unwonted elegance of his attire. Apart from his grayish hair, the tell-tale crows' feet at the outward corners of his eyes, and the curved furrows from the base of the nostrils to the corners of his

thick, drooping moustache, there was little beyond a dignified embonpoint to betoken the ravages of age. His step was light, and though his eyes were a little bloodshot, nothing escaped them. Had it not been for the underlying tragedy of her position, Elise would have laughed at the incongruous sight they presented: she in the gaudy costume of an Indian squaw, he attired with a touch of Parisian elegance. It was as if his discovery of the previous night had put the Seigneur on his mettle to prove to her that, given a certain time allowance, he could successfully rival the youngest lover. In spite of his gay good-nature, she was conscious all the while of a deadly feeling of repulsion, when her hand, which still rested on the Seigneur's arm, touched the hard barrel of the little revolver in his breast-pocket. She walked as one in a dream, more than ever resolved to escape from the château. Had there not suddenly come to her, the knowledge that a man had risked his life for her sake? Moreover, the sacrifice was greater in her eyes because the man who had made it hated all women. Nothing but an innate chivalry, a sense of her utter helplessness, the desire to save her from the Seigneur's brutal curiosity, had made him court certain death.

She listened mechanically to the Seigneur without in the least comprehending his ornate

utterances. They were now walking along the river shore, and the Seigneur's one absorbing interest in life was to explain to her how the timber raft in the centre of the stream would be taken to pieces in sections before it went over the Long Sault. She did not see the huts upon the raft, the girl with the red skirt, whose tiny naked feet dangled over the water, for she was mentally looking back at the glade—that little glade which had acquired a fresh interest for her ever since it became associated with the Stranger's melancholy face and lithe, sinewy form. He was too young to be thus perpetually wedded to sorrow. For a man with so distinguished an air, it was absurd to remain hidden in these sylvan recesses. And she had been unjust to him, had listened to his anguished self-reproaches, his bitter tirades, when he believed that she could not understand him. Surely, she owed him some reparation in return. With a thrill of satisfaction, she remembered that he still kept the necklace. So far, the all-observant Seigneur had failed to notice that she did not wear it. Hitherto, she had been oppressed by the knowledge that she was of little use to anyone, that no one really needed her. The Stranger, too, was all alone in the world, even as she was alone; his melancholy eyes interpreted many things which had hitherto been

mysteries to her. She no longer despaired. Here was an opportunity to show him that all women were not alike. Though one had deceived him, she never would. Surely, in time, if they met again (and she felt certain that in spite of the Seigneur he would find a way to see her), she would change the grave sorrow of his eyes to laughter, drive away the memory of that dead woman who had betrayed him, by the living presence of the woman he had succoured. Yes, her perplexities were beginning to disappear. Even the Seigneur, still drawling politely-worded commonplaces about the effect of sunlight on the Ottawa's brown flood, was not an insuperable obstacle. She had confidence in the Stranger. Directly any necessity for action had arisen, he had risen with it. Besides, had he not said that he would come to her help? In return, she would come to his. Together, they would defy the Seigneur——

'I beg your pardon, Elise,' the Seigneur's slightly sarcastic voice broke in upon her day-dreams; 'but you do not seem to understand what I am saying. The sawdust choking up the river has been the subject of urgent remonstrance on the part of ——'

Elise turned away from him. At that moment, for aught she cared to the contrary, the Ottawa River, in spite of its beauty, might have been

blotted out by sawdust without her missing it. When she looked up, she found that they were close to the château. A furious barking reached them from the entrance to the grounds. Lashed to frenzy by the arrival of a double buggy on the outside, the wolf-hounds continued to bark and hurl themselves against the old iron gates. Undismayed by their clamour, a tall, magnificently handsome woman of imperious presence sat within the buggy, whilst a timorous man-servant and maid trembled in the back-seat.

As he caught sight of the buggy's occupants, the Seigneur's complaisance fell from him like a cloak. With a muttered oath he halted irresolutely, then, gnawing his moustache, strode forward and silenced the dogs. The lady in the buggy surveyed him with an angry air.

'Is it thus that you welcome me to your château, Monsieur de Bonneville, when I do you the honour to pay you a visit? I am not afraid of death, but neither I nor my horses care to be eaten alive. Call off your hounds.'

The Seigneur bowed profoundly, and motioned to Elise to slip through the gates.

'You will find the kitchen at the back of the château, my poor child,' he said, with a paternal air. 'Ask for Marcelline. She will give you some food.'

'At your old tricks, Raoul,' the lady of the buggy declared, with sarcastic emphasis. 'Let me see that squaw. Come hither, child.'

'She knows no French,' said the Seigneur hastily. 'Go, girl, go, or the dogs will worry you.'

'It does not look like it,' remarked the lady of the buggy. 'Why, they are leaping up to caress her. Surely they know the wench!'

'Not at all! You are mistaken. Wolf-hounds always like Indians. Force of heredity. It's the first time they have seen her,' hastily asseverated the Seigneur. 'I met her straying through the Bush, and she asked for food. Permit me to help you out of your carriage. It is many years since Madame de Montgenais visited my poor house.'

Madame de Montgenais' eyes, for her suspicions were still unallayed, followed the retreating figure of the squaw as it disappeared round the back of the château.

'Ah, Raoul, Raoul,' she said sorrowfully, 'though I have not seen you for ten years you are just the same. There is always a woman in the case.'

The Seigneur, ignoring this remark, received her in his arms with effusion as she leaped from the high wheel of the buggy. Her step was still light, her complexion perfect, her glossy hair

black as the raven's wing; but there was a haughty, domineering look about her full lips which augured ill for anyone who displeased her.

That she was displeased with the Seigneur, she scarcely took the trouble to hide as they walked up the avenue of tall overarching trees, and the buggy followed slowly behind. The Seigneur noticed with renewed uneasiness that it contained several large trunks.

'Is it possible that you propose to do me the honour of staying at my poor château in spite of its being so ill-equipped for the reception of visitors?' he asked, as they neared the house.

'It is more than possible—it is an actual fact. You knew that I buried Monsieur de Montgenais more than two years ago, and yet you heartlessly lingered on in Paris without coming to—to dry my tears.'

'It is scarcely possible that it is so long. You have been in New York. And it had not occurred to me that you were overmuch given to weeping,' stammered the Seigneur.

'Twenty years ago, when you wanted me to leave Monsieur de Montgenais, it would have seemed long enough to you. Don't let us fence with one another, Raoul. I reached Belaine from New York only two days ago, and have already heard a story which, like most stories about you,

is not at all to your credit; but this particular scandal is so absurd, so preposterous, that I have felt compelled to inquire into it for myself. That is why I have come to stay here. With the girl in the house people cannot talk as they otherwise would. I chaperon her—if it is not too late—and she makes this visit possible for me.'

The Seigneur's eyes glittered angrily.

'My good neighbours again,' he said airily. 'It is astonishing, and—and touching—quite touching—the interest they sometimes take in me.'

'Is that a polite way of saying that you could dispense with the—the interest which I have always taken in you?' she asked, moving slowly onward.

'How can you wrong me thus? You do me too much honour. Perhaps you will tell me the particular scandal to which you allude?'

'Are there so many, then? You know perfectly well that I mean this poor girl—your ward. I hear that she is wealthy; that you intend to force her to marry you.'

'And what if you have heard correctly, madame?'

'Then you are even worse than I, with all my intimate knowledge of your proclivities, believed you to be.'

'You flatter me.'

'Ah, Raoul'—she spoke sorrowfully, her great black eyes softened—'I remember before you went to Paris. You were very different then.'

'Yes, Paris does enlarge one's views,' he replied gaily. 'You must have thought me somewhat of a country bumpkin, madame, at that remote period to which you so feelingly refer.'

'I thought you an honourable man. Paris seems to have changed you,' she said, with some emphasis.

The Seigneur barred the way.

'I trust that you will not enlarge upon your unfavourable impressions of me to my ward. I am all she has in the world.'

'And, I should imagine, a great deal more than she wants. Enough of this, Raoul. By bringing the girl here without a chaperon, you have placed her in an indefensible position. I have come to protect her.'

'To protect her! From what?'

The Seigneur's rubicund visage blanched.

'From you. We will discuss this later. Take me to her at once.'

The Seigneur temporized, for he did not know how quickly Elise could get out of her paint and feathers, and, in order to prolong the conversation, he had purposely made himself as irritating

as possible. For her own sake, Elise would not reveal her identity with the squaw.

He lingered in the grounds, pointing out hypothetical improvements from time to time, Madame de Montgenais watching him the while with an enigmatic smile.

'Don't you think,' she suggested at last, 'that your ward should be informed of my arrival? Perhaps, as she will not come to receive me, you had better conduct me to her.'

The Seigneur smiled in a relieved way, for he had caught a glimpse of Elise in the hall. He again offered Madame de Montgenais his arm.

'Ah, madame,' he said tenderly, 'to see you at my poor château is indeed a sight which——'

'Has annoyed you more than you care to show. So this is your ward! Present her to me.'

Elise came shyly forward with a questioning glance at Madame de Montgenais.

The latter looked at the girl's glorious beauty, and bit her lip with vexation, as though something in the expression of Elise's lovely eyes aroused all the good that was in her.

Seasoned woman of the world that she was, Madame de Montgenais instantly resolved that she would befriend Elise.

'Permit me to congratulate you,' she said to

the Seigneur as Elise came slowly down the steps.

'On what?'

The Seigneur was manifestly uncomfortable, for there was a suggestion of banter in her tone.

'On your recently acquired taste for bread-and-butter.'

'For bread-and-butter! I don't understand you.'

'Yes, bread-and-butter! Hush! here she comes. Present her to me.'

The Seigneur advanced to meet Elise, and took her by the hand.

'Elise, I wish to have the pleasure of introducing you to my oldest' (there was an imperceptible stress on 'oldest') 'friend, Madame de Montgenais.'

'Not so very old,' tartly murmured Madame de Montgenais, momentarily overcome by the girl's beauty and freshness. 'If I remember aright, Seigneur, we played together when you were a young man and I was a little girl. That would give you, at least, a seniority of some twenty years or more.'

The Seigneur, though inwardly furious at this reminder of his lost youth, smiled pleasantly.

'It is not for me to dispute the passage of the

years. With Madame de Montgenais, time has a trick of standing still.'

Madame de Montgenais tapped him with her fan.

'Hypocrite! flatterer! To stand still is to fall behind.' She turned to Elise and held out both hands. 'Child, how lonely you must be for the touch of a woman's arms!'

There was a dormant maternity in Madame de Montgenais which appealed to Elise.

'Ah, madame!' she faltered, 'your face is beautiful and good. You will befriend me?'

'Good—my face good! Your remark betrays a fine inexperience, mademoiselle. It is the first time I have ever been told as much.' In spite of her sarcastic tone, she was pleased. That anyone, even a schoolgirl, should have found her prevailing expression to be one of goodness amused this vigorous woman of the world. 'One must allow for the freshness, the inexperience of youth—must one not, Seigneur?—that youth which is so far from us both.'

'Yes,' said the Seigneur, admitting the truth of this sarcasm in his fear lest Elise would make a scene. 'I am afraid, even though I have done my best to amuse her, that the poor child is lonely.'

'Very well; she is not going to be lonely any

more,' declared Madame de Montgenais. She held Elise at arm's length and gazed earnestly into her blushing face. 'Oh ho! mademoiselle, we have a beauty which is ravishing, but yet there is a decided little temper, is there not? We want to get our own way?'

'All women are like that. For Madame de Montgenais to wish for anything is to obtain it,' said the Seigneur, with a somewhat florid bow.

'You must have exchanged confidences with the late Monsieur de Montgenais,' suggested that gentleman's widow, in still more acrid tones. 'But your ward will show me to my rooms. I have heard that the west wing is the most comfortable part of the house.'

'I — I had taken up my quarters there,' stammered the discomfited Seigneur.

'Eh bien, Raoul, my maid will soon alter all that.' She shot an acute glance at him. 'Your ward looks better in this costume than in that of an Indian squaw. Nay, never blush, child. No Indian ever walked with your grace; a squaw always turns her toes in and waddles. But we must exchange confidences later. Now run away and tell my maid to prepare the west wing for me.'

When the astonished Elise had re-entered the

house, Madame de Montgenais turned to the perplexed Seigneur.

'Wolf! So this is the game you play.'

The Seigneur permitted himself to sulk.

'I don't understand,' he said, scratching the gravel with the toe of his boot, as if he had been caught in the commission of some childish peccadillo.

'You don't understand! Very well. I must do my best to enlighten you.'

'Pardon my seeming discourtesy, but may I ask if you contemplate honouring me with a long visit?' the Seigneur uncomfortably inquired.

'Why?'

'In spite of the two of you being here together, people will talk.'

Madame de Montgenais looked significantly after Elise.

'Haven't they talked already? You and I, Raoul'—she laid a delicately-gloved hand upon his arm—'are people of the world. You might have remembered before you brought this girl here alone that she is motherless.'

The Seigneur's temper began to get the better of him.

'Pardon me, but I am the best judge of my own conduct; I answer for it to no man.'

'But you will have to answer for it to a good

many women. Be warned in time, or you will be judged elsewhere,' she said significantly. 'Why do you ask me how long I stay here?'

He muttered something about the crudeness of his menage.

'Yes, yes, we can soon alter all that. I must confess, Raoul, I am somewhat disappointed to find that you are not overjoyed to see me again. Is it because of your recently-acquired taste for bread-and-butter?'

'Ah!'—and there was unmistakable sincerity in his long-drawn sigh—'if you only knew how bread-and-butter bores me! I much prefer caviare.'

'You do not seem to recognise its wholesomeness.'

'My palate prefers something more highly flavoured,' he said angrily. 'Besides, she hates me—thinks I'm old enough to be her father.'

'Well, aren't you—or her grandfather? People marry early in Canada. My dear Raoul'—she again took his arm—'my dear Raoul, if you only knew what a sorry figure you cut! At one time you had a sense of the ridiculous, but you have evidently lost it. Come, I must take you in hand. There will be plenty of opportunity during the next month or two.'

'Next mon——' The Seigneur's dismay was

evident. 'Do you intend to honour me for so long?'

'Ah!' she said, with mocking tenderness, 'it will take longer than that to knit together the tangled threads of our lives again.'

'Yes,' the Seigneur moodily admitted, 'it will. Knitting was never my forte.'

'No? Then it is time you became a little more domesticated, if you do not wish to reap your wild oats.'

'I am not much of a reaper either,' growled the Seigneur, collecting his scattered wits. 'It always seemed to me so much more prosaic than sowing.'

If she did nothing else, Madame de Montgenais could make him feel. There was a curious charm about her presence, although he dreaded her fiery temper, her overbearing insistence on having her own way. Her magnificent vitality, her Junoesque beauty, mingled with a certain provocative fire in her eyes, found an appropriate setting as she lingered a moment on the stone steps and looked down upon him ere he turned away. He felt that he amused her, that he had made himself ridiculous in her eyes by his blundering attempts to force a mere chit of a schoolgirl to marry him. It was difficult to retreat with dignity from so undignified a position, especially as she stood there watching him, still with

that smothered amusement in the curve of her red lips.

'You look magnificent there,' he said, bowing low. 'The attitude is perfect. Permit me to contemplate it from a—distance.'

'Au revoir,' she mocked. 'You make your exit with a better grace than I had imagined possible, Raoul. We shall meet again presently at lunch. Bon appetit!'

As the Seigneur strode away towards the river, the smile ceased to linger on her lips; she angrily struck the stone balustrade with her strong white hand.

'The coward—the coward! And yet I—yet I—— He used to take me in his arms when I was a child. How handsome he was! And now the villainy of him! The sight of that girl reminds me of what I was at her age. Oh the sting of it! To give one's self to an old man, waste the best years of one's life cherishing an ideal and find it—that! Pouf! What a horrible thing life is! Why can't God make us one thing or the other? Half-measures are always a mistake. I'll go and talk to the girl. She irritates me, and yet there's a dewy freshness about her which fills my heart. Ah-h! little one; back again. Why do you kneel to me?'

'You are so beautiful,' said Elise, with bated

breath—'so beautiful, so strong. Heaven has sent you to me.'

She kissed Madame de Montgenais' hand, drew it to her cheek, pressed it to her heart.

They went up the stone steps, the elder woman with her arm round the younger. Looking down from her majestic height, Madame de Montgenais drew the girl's flower-like face upward, and kissed her.

'Now, little one, I am going to mother you, and keep away the wolves.'

'Wolves! Do you mean——'

Madame de Montgenais waved an ironical hand in the direction taken by the Seigneur.

'I mean that he is the biggest wolf for miles round. Surely you don't love him, child?'

'Love! I hate him, madame!'

'Well, child, that's the next thing to loving. I hate him, too—in a way.'

The girl looked up with an inspiration.

'But he does not hate you?'

'That's what I fear. But I am hungry; let us go in.'

X

THE CONSPIRATORS

'CHUT, chut, p'tite Gabrielle! V'la les rubans rouges. And the white frock of a purity immaculate! Out of the ash-barrel, little toad, grenouille. Ah-h! If the good God only knew what a trial these tiny angels are, He would send demons by way of a change. They couldn't be worse.'

'Patience, Margot, patience.' Jardot philosophically picked up p'tite Gabrielle, and wiped her tear-stained face with his red handkerchief as he took away from her an old tin can which she had fished out of the ash-barrel and looked upon as a priceless jewel. 'Is everything ready? They laughed at me, but they are all coming. Even Gran'père Labelle declared he would come if I had a scheme to worry the Seigneur. He says it makes him quite cheerful to see anyone look worried.'

'Such a good old man, and so near the angels, too,' sarcastically remarked Margot. 'Poor angels!

What will gran'père do when they come for him ?'

'They won't.'

'Won't what, b'nhomme?'

'Come for him,' tersely remarked Jardot. 'They'll keep as far away from him as possible. When gran'père takes a little too much whisky he is a terrible man, feeble though he is. Even a demon daren't face him, let alone an angel.'

Margot paused to laugh and kiss the baby, who gurgled in return, and obstinately declined to have soft socks tied on his little pink feet. Put back in the cradle, he refused to go to sleep, but, hanging over one side, did his best to upset it. Jardot, versed in infantile strategy, caught the crowing youngster, and set him on his knee opposite p'tite Gabrielle, who, dimpling into smiles, insisted on embracing the baby, whereupon the baby scratched her cheek, and there was another tempest.

'La, la, la! they've all the curse of Adam and Eve bundled into their tiny bodies,' said the exasperated Margot, pausing by the door, broom in hand. 'Those vieillards will be here directly; and my hands! Look at my hands!'

She held up her hands in affected horror. Jardot, at the risk of dropping the baby, kissed them, and she boxed his ears.

'Is this a time to be making love to an old

married woman?' she asked, coquette to the finger-tips.

'Would you have me make love to an unmarried young one, then?' not unnaturally inquired Jardot, well aware of the torrent his words would provoke.

After the storm had passed he put the baby into his cradle, found p'tite Gabrielle's rag-doll, and took down his hat.

'I will fetch the Stranger,' he said, pausing to look round with an air of gratified pride. 'It is a palace.'

The old eight-day clock ticked peacefully in one corner, its gilded pendulum catching the light from the open stove as it swung to and fro and dazzled p'tite Gabrielle, who leaned against the oak case and vainly endeavoured to seize the swaying shaft of light. Behind the stove was an ancient dresser, gay with a set of wedding-plates, each bearing a different legend. Here, was the sportsman who returned empty-handed; there, the discomfited swain whose 'best girl' had been carried off by another man. On the next row, a sleigh dashed madly along, pursued by wolves with unnaturally red tongues—tongues which were out of all proportion to the size of their bodies. The companion plate realistically depicted an empty sleigh covered with blood-stains. Beside

it lolled four very big wolves, complacently fondling protuberant stomachs. Wild asters set in an antique china bowl filled up another corner of the room. In the middle stood a long pine table, worn and polished by the friction of countless elbows. There was a bowl of flowers in the centre of the table, tastefully encircled by cakes of tobacco, with a sharp-pointed knife for slicing them. Close to the stove stood an old red-cushioned oak chair, which was evidently the seat of honour. Two or three rocking-chairs and half a dozen wooden ones with big arms, were ranged round the table. On the dresser a dozen cut-glass tumblers glistened in the firelight. By the side of the glasses, Margot had placed an enormous blue-and-white jug, from which issued the penetrating odour of whisky. Her spinning-wheel stood beneath the ancient dresser. Through the half-open inner door could be seen a glimpse of a venerable four-poster, with its dainty chintz curtains, on one of which was pinned a highly-coloured portrait of the Blessed Virgin.

As Jardot went out, plump p'tite Gabrielle, tired of trying to seize the pendulum, slid down on the yellow-painted floor, leaned her head against the clock-case, let the rag-doll slip beside her, and fell asleep. Margot, with a smile of satisfaction, gathered up the child and laid her on

the bed in the next room. Then the baby, inspired by this good example, also went to sleep, and Margot hastily attired herself in her Sunday frock, putting a bunch of purple asters in her raven hair as a finishing touch. She had barely finished her toilet and brought a jug of ice-cold water from the well, when there was a sound of slow, shuffling steps outside.

'Ah, ah!' she said joyously, 'Gran'père Labelle! Bon soir, Gran'père—bon soir. Sit down on the step and let me pat your back until you breathe again.'

Gran'père Labelle coughed horribly, as if nothing would ever induce him to breathe again to oblige anybody, and wheezed himself nearly black in the face. It was not until Margot had taken his hat and stick, almost lifted him into the chair with the red cushions, and given him a tumbler of whisky-and-water, that he was able to speak. His voice had all the thin, squeaky treble of old age, and sounded as if it came from a long way off.

'Chut! chut!' he said. 'Chut! chut! To bring an old man all the way from the village just to'—he coughed again—'just to listen to that blagueur of yours. It always makes me swear when I think of him.'

'S-s-sh! Gran'père! Don't think of him. I can do all the thinking where he is concerned.

You will be rested in a minute.' She brought him the cradle and set it rocking. 'V'la le p'tit. The image of you, Gran'père.'

Such a libellous statement was an injustice to the baby, but, too young to recognise its direful import, he slept peacefully. Gran'père Labelle, after swallowing another tumbler of whisky-and-water, which flew down his cavernous, wrinkled old throat as if in a hurry to get to its journey's end, permitted himself a gap-toothed smile at the interesting infant, and declared that he traced the resemblance.

'A child with a face like that,' he muttered, 'is bound to go far'; and cast another longing look at the whisky-jug.

'Presently, Gran'père, presently,' Margot declared, bustling about. 'You know you always get quarrelsome after your third drink. Wait till the others come. If they are a quarter of an hour behind you, they say you take advantage of your age.'

The old man struck his stick angrily on the floor.

'Quarrelsome! quarrelsome! Me quarrelsome! Whisky doesn't warm me as it used to do when I was young. Then it fired the blood. I was quarrelsome then. People ran from me then. He, he! Whisky was whisky in those days; it

warmed like lightning and fired the blood. Now it barely stirs one. They don't make as good whisky as in the days of my youth. Why, we always smashed the furniture after a jamboree in the days when I was young. Always! People expected it. That was why they made it so strong; it took a strong man to smash it; but I did it somehow. He, he! They used to bring it out for me to smash when they saw me coming in the old days!'

'Yes, yes, I dare say they did, Gran'père. That was all very well then, but times have altered—for the better. So has the whisky. Let me fill your pipe. You've brought your magnificent pipe with you? There isn't such another pipe in Canada.'

The old man laboriously produced from an inner pocket a leather case, which contained a silver-mounted meerschaum with an inscription on the stem to the effect that the pipe had been presented to him by all his descendants on the attainment of his ninetieth birthday. Margot filled it, and the wrinkles on his face relaxed.

'It goes well,' he said, ashamed of his ill-temper. 'It goes well, grandchild Margot. A cushion in the small of my back, and I am content—very content. A little whisky, and still less water, and a pipe filled with good tabac, and

I am always content—I am an angel. He, he! an angel.'

Margot knew from long experience exactly how to deal with Gran'père, so, without disputing his claim to be considered one of the heavenly host, she put a pillow in the small of his aged back, and brought him some more whisky. It was important that the other guests should see Gran'père Labelle in a good temper, or there was no telling what might happen; for, when he was in a bad temper, Gran'père impartially insulted his friends and enemies alike. Presently more steps sounded outside, and, with an effort, the old man straightened himself up in his chair.

The other guests entered, talking volubly in patois. Editor Poulard wore a handkerchief round his head, as if he had not yet recovered from the effects of his most recent 'jag.' He was a gaunt, thin man, with wild black eyes and hair. He did not smoke, but chewed. The right-hand corner of his mouth was stained yellow with tobacco-juice. His friend Rabilleaud, the gaoler, a little dried-up man, attired in a blue coat and gray trousers, appeared to be remonstrating with Poulard about something.

'Had I my way, I would burn the old rat out of his hole,' Poulard indignantly declared. 'Even a rat leaves his neighbours something to eat.

How am I to feed my chipmunks if the Seigneur seizes my printing-press?'

'Quiet, little chicken, quiet,' said Rabilleaud, urging him forward. 'Madame Jardot, though this good-for-nothing has a headache, I have brought him to pay homage to you.' He spoke in a faint, dried-up voice, which yet retained the traces of an exquisite politeness. 'Ah, Letellier, shy robin that thou art, come forward.'

Letellier, the ferryman, tall, red-haired, his fat face wearing an apologetic smile, came forward and kissed Margot's hand. His watery blue eyes brightened expectantly when he caught sight of the baby. Throwing his black hat into an unoccupied corner, he tiptoed over to the cradle, tenderly lifted the child, and, sitting down in a rocker, swayed gently to and fro, all the wrinkles smoothing out of his face as if it had been ironed.

'Where is the b'nhomme?' asked Rabilleaud, after deferentially making inquiries with regard to Gran'père's health.

It annoyed Gran'père Labelle if people failed to remember that the state of his health was an important matter. Should they forget a second time, he began to be aggressive with a vigour beyond his years.

'He will arrive in one moment. He brings m'sieu the Stranger of the Mill with him,' said

Margot, making signs to Letellier to come forward and pay his respect to Gran'père Labelle, who glared at him in offended majesty. 'Speak to him, M'sieu Letellier,' she hurriedly whispered. 'Make tender inquiries about his health, or he will remind you of the unpaid interest of your mortgage.'

'Ah-h! Old rascal, old carcajou,' grumbled Letellier, in a cavernous voice which nearly filled the room. 'I am tired of working to pay his interest. I am his bond-slave. Skunk! Some-day I will tell him what I think—a piece of my mind. He is a weasel that sucks our blood.'

'That rascal Letellier is going from bad to worse. He owes me——' began Gran'père Labelle, but was silenced by Margot.

'You must excuse Gran'père,' she whispered to Letellier; 'he has an acid stomach. Some days it is more acid than usual, particularly if he drinks too much whisky.'

Letellier's face wore a seraphic smile, but his voice rumbled like a volcano as he gathered himself together, thrust out a huge hand, and gave Gran'père Labelle's a jerk which nearly brought that grasping old man to the floor in an undignified heap. Then, with two strides, Letellier shambled back to the rocker, and abandoned himself to a rapt contemplation of the baby.

'Bang! bang!' (Good! good!) he murmured. 'Some day we will make of him a ferryman extraordinary. I will take him down to the ferry and show him to Chicot and Jeanne.'

Fortunately for the general peace, by the time Margot had put Gran'père Labelle together again with the aid of more whisky, Jardot came in accompanied by the Stranger.

'Speak English, I pray you,' whispered Margot to her somewhat embarrassed guests. 'He is an Englishman.'

'Bang lache' (Big coward), obligingly muttered Gran'père Labelle, on whom the whisky began to take effect, in spite of his querulous complaints as to its weakness. 'Where is Toussaint?'

Toussaint Leduc came sidling along the path like a crab, evidently extremely gratified at the way in which the Stranger endeavoured to atone for his former indifference. His little monkeyfied, wizened face wreathed itself in smiles, and he nearly doubled up in his efforts to induce the Stranger to enter the cabane first.

'Eh bien, m'sieu, we have arrived,' said Jardot. 'Permit me formally to present to you Madame Jardot.'

The Stranger, with a cordial bow, took Margot's hand, and said how delighted he was to meet her

again. His bow to the assembled group was less cordial.

'I do not understand, gentlemen,' he said, 'why you wish to meet me; but I owe you an apology for not having before sought your acquaintance. Circumstances'—he bowed profoundly to Gran'père Labelle—'have so affected my spirits that I have not felt it right to inflict myself upon you lest I should cast an unmerited gloom over the community.'

'Vair han'some, bagosh!' declared Toussaint, anxious to air his English.

Gran'père Labelle, who understood English perfectly, attempted a stately bow—a bow intended to convey his contempt for Englishmen of all kinds. Its effect was somewhat marred by his having to hold on to both arms of the chair in order to keep his balance. His pipe fell from his mouth, and was dexterously caught by Margot as he crumpled up and went to sleep.

'Now he will be quiet for half an hour,' she said, with an air of relief. 'Old men and babies are hard to manage unless they are drinking all the time.'

'Dat is true.' Rabilleaud removed the pipe from his mouth. 'De end and de beginnin'. Dere is one leedle diff'rence, bagosh! De old

man drink de whiskee; de leedle bébé he know bettaire.'

Jardot began to speak excitedly in French, as he half filled the glasses with whisky, and Margot poured in the water. Then she sliced up the tobacco, and, Letellier, still holding the sleeping child, sat down on the doorstep. He had a theory that too much tobacco-smoke was bad for 'the little ferryman,' as he designated the baby.

Margot interrupted her voluble husband with a tap on the shoulder.

'That will do, b'nhomme. Speak English.'

The fiery Jardot paused, tumbler in one hand, pipe in the other.

'I will tell to you, my friends, he is a coward, this Seigneur. For years he has oppressed us, he has whipped us with scorpions, trampled on us as men. Why, he has even made love to all the pretty girls in the village.'

'You hav' mak' love to dem yourself, too,' said the husky voice of Rabilleaud, as he put down his empty tumbler.

Jardot glanced at his wife.

'Moi! Oh yes; I have amused them just to pass the time, but I have always known where to leave off. The Seigneur'—and there was a pregnant meaning in his voice—'has not.'

'He hav' mak' to kiss Marcelline,' declared

Toussaint; but his daughter, Marcelline, was so ugly that no one believed him.

'And my wife, too,' said Jardot, with another meaning glance at Margot.

'And Madame Letellier, he hav' mak' love to her, too,' came a deep growl from the doorstep. 'Some day I mak' to trow him in de wataire.'

'Oh, ma foi! He has mak' worse to me. He has sent me to pr—prison!' shouted Poulard. 'Pr—prison! All because I hav' leedle disturbance, juss my fun. Me! Pr—prison! Me!'

'Vair well, let us talk somet'ing else, bagosh!' philosophically declared Rabilleaud. 'You are plaintee glad to come pr—prison when you mak' beast of yourself—when you git mad dronk.'

His professional pride was deeply hurt by Poulard's ingratitude.

'But listen, my friends,' almost shrieked the excitable Jardot. 'Listen. He has shut up in his château a young demoiselle—a demoiselle of a beauty enchanting; and he is going to marry her.'

'Dat is de best t'ing I hav' hear of de Seigneur,' growled Letellier. 'Ordinairement, non, he not marie wit' nobody.'

Margot again brought round the whisky.

'I tell to you, my friends,' Jardot prided himself on his oratory—'I tell to you, my friends, the

Seigneur is a bad man. He has shut up this beautiful demoiselle. It is necessary that we burn the château about his ears, and make her free.'

'Dat is vair necessaire,' acquiesced Toussaint, with tipsy gravity. 'Bagosh! but it will mak' de beeg blaze, dat château.'

Poulard nodded with pleased acquiescence, and poured himself out some more whisky. Only Rabilleaud shook his head, for he saw trouble looming in the distance. It was enough to put up with the vagaries of his friends every day without having to wait upon them as prisoners. From past experience, he knew how exacting they were. He again shook his head and absently refilled his glass.

Jardot's imagination began to soar.

'We will burn the château about his ears, the old fox,' he declared decisively, 'and rescue mademoiselle. Then the Seigneur will go away, and we shall be happy for evermore.'

The strong whisky began to affect Jardot's friends. Although they all had grievances against the Seigneur, it had never before occurred to them to take such drastic measures as burning his house about his ears. But the whisky was powerful, and they sympathized with Jardot. Besides, after having failed him in his struggle

with Father Brunot, they owed him a good turn. At the same time, a dim consciousness lurked in their whisky-befuddled brains that Father Brunot might possibly have a voice in the matter.

'I tell to you,' said Jardot, pleased with the success of his efforts—'I tell to you, my friends, that the Seigneur set me on to quarrel with Father Brunot, and laughed at me when I was outcast. Oh, he is a bad man. Yes, we must burn him out.'

Gran'père Labelle woke up and peevishly looked round for his pipe.

'Nom de pipe! Burn out de Seigneur! You are crazee.'

'We will mak' to burn him out,' they all shouted, moved by Jardot's enthusiasm. 'We will mak' to burn out de Seigneur.'

Margot once more half filled the glasses. Even old Gran'père Labelle caught the prevailing excitement, and began to sing in cracked tones, while the astonished Stranger, who had with difficulty prevented himself from interrupting Jardot, wondered whether he had fallen among madmen.

'Stop,' said Jardot, as they were about to drink. 'Let us all drink together, my friends. Destruction to the Seigneur! We will burn him out.'

They rose as one man, even Letellier, still holding the baby, who had slept unmoved through

the tumult, coming in to share the toast. He, too, did not love the Seigneur.

'But, my good friends'—the Stranger strode impulsively forward—'my good friends, you will get yourselves into trouble. You are making fools of——'

'Bang lache!' quavered Gran'père Labelle, raising his tumbler with trembling hands. 'Mak' more strong de whiskee, Margot.

'"Pelang, pelang, mon cher garçon;
I t'ink of you—t'ink of you night and day,
Don't mak' no differ——"

More whiskee, Margot.

'"Il y a longtemps que je t'aime,
Jamais je ne t'oublierai!"

More strong whis——'

A black shadow fell across the threshold, and Father Brunot stood nodding affably by the doorway, in all the glory of his new cassock.

'Do not drink any more,' he said placidly. 'You have had enough. My children, go home. Jardot, come to me to-morrow.'

Poulard staggered forward, derisively snapping his fingers.

'Come to you to-morrow! You say dat! I——'

'Go!' said the priest quietly.

Without in the least meaning to do so, Poulard staggered past the priest and went away. Rabilleaud followed him in silence, lest he should get into trouble on his way home.

'Put down the child.' The priest turned suddenly to Letellier. 'There is someone waiting for you at the ferry.'

Letellier put the child in its mother's arms, and went out towards the ferry.

Father Brunot laid a benignant hand on the infant's little head and blessed it.

'These poor children of mine, monsieur!' he said, turning to the Stranger. 'These poor children of mine! They are always getting into trouble. They keep me busy from morning till night. Gran'père Labelle, wake up. Where do you want to go to?'

'Wantsh go to bed,' declared Gran'père Labelle, with conviction.

'"He's fader is full-blooded Irish,
An' hees moder is pure Ca—Ca—Canayenne,"'

he hiccoughed, falling into the priest's arms.

The priest gently supported him.

'Very well. I have come to help you home. You will be ill again to-morrow.'

'Bang lache!' stuttered Gran'père Labelle—'bang lache! I am not ze leedle bébé, moi. I will not mak' go to bed—

'"Alouetté, gentille Alouetté—
Alouetté—je te plum-plum-erai!"'

The priest tucked the old man's shrivelled arm within his own.

'Come, come! no more words. You will go home to bed. His pipe, Madame Margot? Thank you. Come, Gran'père—come! Remember that "acid stomach" of yours.'

And Gran'père, clinging to Father Brunot, and muttering references to his acid stomach ill-becoming such an ancient, tottered away.

'I don't understand,' said the Stranger as the little cabane gradually emptied itself. 'What is the meaning of all this, Jardot?'

Jardot leaned against the wall in sullen despair.

'That d——d priest again! I cannot fight him.'

'But I never heard of such a mad scheme,' said the Stranger. 'We can think of some much better plan than that. I thank you from my heart, but——'

Jardot brushed aside his proffered hand and dashed into the Bush.

Margot began to clear away the glasses and wipe the whisky-rings from the table.

'La, la, la! it was a good plan,' she said sententiously. 'It would have made an end of things. M'sieu will please be seated? Jardot will soon return. It was a good plan.'

She sighed regretfully.

'A good plan to burn a man's house about his ears! But Mademoiselle de Marsac might have been burned, too.'

Margot shook her head.

'Ah no, m'sieu. It would have been the best thing of all.'

'But what,' asked the perplexed Stranger, 'could I have done with her if I had got her away in time?'

Margot permitted herself to be a trifle contemptuous. She liked the Stranger, but thought that he wanted rousing. It was necessary that he should have a shock.

'What could you have done with her, m'sieu? Why, married her!' she said quietly, and went on washing glasses.

The Stranger followed Jardot.

XI

THE SEIGNEUR'S GUEST

THE tower window was open to the afternoon sunshine. Since Jardot's daring visit Elise always left it open, for she felt that he might, in any sudden emergency, climb up again and be chilled to find it shut. Jardot was an enthusiastic worshipper, and, when the Seigneur was away, Elise sometimes paid a visit to Margot and 'p'tite Gabrielle.' It amused Elise, as soon as the baby clenched riotous fists in her hair, to let it gradually fall around her in a glittering mass for the delight of Margot, who no longer called her the 'Yellow Woman,' but the 'Shining One.' On such occasions Jardot, in spite of his protests, was sent to chop wood. It brought him back to earth again, Margot declared.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. As the Seigneur smoked a big cigar on the veranda, its scent reached Madame de Montgenais, and gradually led to an exchange of confidences with

Elise on the subject of the Stranger, in whom Elise admitted a sisterly interest, although she did not altogether understand him.

'Why,' she asked Madame de Montgenais, 'does the Stranger say such dreadful things about women? He seems to hate them all.'

'My dear child,' explained Madame de Montgenais, 'a man who begins by hating all women generally ends by devotedly loving every woman he meets. It is the complex sort of apology he makes to the sex; and the more he apologizes, the better he gets to like it.'

'Ah!' Elise shivered. 'If you could only have heard the awful things the Stranger said about us! They did not convey that impression.'

'He seems to be like the heathen who "rage furiously." My dear child, if men could only hear the awful things we sometimes say about them the balance would be tolerably even.'

The girl sat at Madame de Montgenais' feet.

'Why should a man hate a woman? Did not God first make this beautiful world and then place men and women in it to love one another?'

'You have yet to learn, my child, that the Almighty's intentions are not always carried out by His frail creations. He seems to have allowed most of them a little too much latitude, and they

always avail themselves of it in season and out of season.'

'But why should a man hate a woman? He is so much stronger than she is,' persisted Elise. 'And it is so cowardly to hate anything weaker than ourselves.'

'It may be cowardly, but it is convenient when the matter comes to a head. Besides, a man hates a woman for a variety of reasons.' Madame de Montgenais bent down and caressed Elise's beautiful hair. 'Why should a woman hate a man? As for myself, I believe that the Creator made men and women alternately to attract and repel one another, in order to vary the monotony of an existence which otherwise people would not struggle to live through. We do give men cause to hate us sometimes.'

'Why?'

'Why? Oh, how do I know? How does any woman know? Why should a woman trouble herself about a reason for anything when she cannot even give a plausible one for her own existence? If she loves a man and he doesn't love her, she hates him; but if he loves her and she doesn't love him, he ends by hating her. There doesn't seem to be any middle way in which they could call a truce.'

'But,' Elise gazed timidly up at her, 'love is

the tragedy of life; it is a beautiful, but a fearful thing to—love!'

'Ah, that's your inexperience. Love—man's love—is the comedy of life—to a man.

> '"Man's love is of man's life a thing apart;
> 'Tis woman's whole existence—"

when she hasn't her frocks to think about. A woman thinks about frocks and love; a man thinks of good eating and amusing himself. A woman makes a god of a man, and is sometimes untrue to him; a man makes a god of his stomach, and is for ever constant to the god of his idolatry—that's the difference between the two. If women paid more attention to their digestions, they'd get over their love affairs much quicker than they do.'

The girl sighed.

'It doesn't sound very nice. There weren't any men in my convent except the masters.'

'And a very good thing, too. It prevented you from being biassed by inferior specimens. There are all sorts and conditions of men. Now you are of an age to see for yourself, to choose for yourself, to compare them with one another for yourself.'

'You forget the Seigneur. In his anxiety to make me happy he seems to have resolved that

any such comparison on my part is unnecessary, and that he will do the choosing.'

'The Seigneur! Pouf! He is, as Bismarck said of someone, "A lath painted to look like iron"; and the paint has worn off in places—particularly on the top of his head. I will arrange matters with the Seigneur.'

'You have known him for long?'

'An eternity. Ever since I was a little girl, and he used to take me into his arms and kiss me. He was handsome then—a sort of youthful D'Artagnan with a touch of Galahad. Now he is a rustic Aramis, with the soul of a money-lender. He has muddled his brains away, and there's not much but husk left of him. Still, he has a nasty trick—always had—of wanting his own way.'

'Ah, yes, he is very violent when he is thwarted.'

'My dear child,' said Madame de Montgenais, 'when you have had my experience, you will know that it is good for men to be thwarted. It teaches them that, after all, they are only men, and not demi-gods. I am going to thwart the Seigneur. He will not like it, but it will be good for him.'

'You must not quarrel with him for my sake.'

'Oh, no!' said Madame de Montgenais, a little grimly, 'I prefer to do it for my own. The

Seigneur has deteriorated; he must be brought up to high-water mark again.'

'But if he will not come?'

'Inexperience again, my child.' Madame de Montgenais put on a plumed black hat, and carefully adjusted it to the proper angle. 'A woman, always provided that she has the tact not to let him see it, can lead a man in any direction she pleases—upward or downward. She can make him believe that he is going up when he is going down, and going down when he is going up, if she wants to do so. Sometimes, she can almost persuade herself that she is going up with him.'

Elise rose from the bearskin on which she had been sitting.

'It is all too complicated for me. The only thing I can realize is that I am no longer alone. If you leave me, I shall die of grief.'

The elder woman gazed at her curiously.

'Is it because I am useful to you?'

The girl looked into her fiery dark eyes with sweet confiding blue ones.

'It is because I love you. You say hard things, but you're not soured by the world, although there seems to me to be something you want very much—something which the world has not yet given you.'

'I hope the world won't give it me, for then I

shan't have it to look forward to. Don't talk to me of love. I won't be loved by you, child,' declared the other, then caught the girl in her arms and gently shook her. 'You are a sentimental schoolgirl—a baby—a—a mass of pink and white and gold who should be playing with her doll instead of studying mankind.'

'A great English poet says, "The proper study of mankind is man."'

'Then he tells an untruth; it's woman.'

'Ah!' Elise nestled against her. 'You cannot frighten me, because I love you. Now I am safe.'

'As safe as the dove in the hawk's nest, until the hawk grows hungry again. Well, well, well! I'll do the best I can for you. But we keep the Seigneur waiting, and that is the unpardonable sin where a man is concerned. A woman who commits it occasionally may be pardoned; the woman who does it habitually ought to be shut up in a convent or strangled. She is of no use in the world. Put on your hat, child.'

'My hat! Are we going out?'

'Yes; we are about to whitewash the Seigneur, and teach him the moral duty of social obligations. As a first step, we will take him to make a call.'

'A call?'

'Yes; a call. Did you never make a call before?'

'But where?'

'Ask the Seigneur. He is ready for us on the veranda. Do you not observe the expression of placid serenity on his classic features?'

'In my inexperience I should hardly call it "placid serenity." He looks as if he would like to murder someone.'

'So he would. He would like to murder me—if he got the chance. Ah, Raoul, I am just telling your ward that you remind me of a May morning: you irradiate cheerfulness; one almost expects you to break out into blossom.'

The Seigneur angrily switched his boot with a light riding-cane, as if he would like to break out into verbal blossoms of an unmistakable character, but he said nothing. Madame de Montgenais threw him a rose, and he recovered himself as they turned in the direction of the Stranger's hut.

Elise gave a little cry, and stopped short.

'Where are we going?'

'We are going to call on Monsieur the Solitary,' said Madame de Montgenais. 'The Seigneur did not even think of doing so until I suggested it; and yet he is supposed to have brains.'

'It had not occurred to me to make the ac-

quaintance of this English madman,' growled the Seigneur. 'It may be as well, and thus avoid a scandal.'

'Quite so,' said Madame de Montgenais dryly. 'Really, Seigneur, you improve daily. Such thoughtfulness is almost pathetic. We have had quite enough scandals already; it is time that you helped to put an end to, instead of creating, them.'

The Seigneur, disdaining to reply, moodily led the way into the Bush. This gadfly woman irritated him to madness, yet did not appear to perceive it. All his life he had been accustomed to misbehave. He felt the difficulty of an old dog learning new tricks. He was being made to behave himself, and did not like it. If he had not dandled Madame de Montgenais in his arms as a child, he would——

'Yes, I know all about that,' said Madame de Montgenais, once more divining his thought.

The Seigneur plunged hastily forward.

'Plague take the woman!' he muttered, switching off the tops of the golden-rod.

They came upon the Stranger before he could run away into the Bush. Rube, undeterred by mere conventional politeness, hastily scuttled there, family and all. The broncho, recognising Elise, trotted up and asked for sugar.

To add to the embarrassment of the situation, the Stranger was in his shirt-sleeves. For a moment, his dark, mournful eyes lit up as he bowed to Elise. There was an amazing difference in them when he haughtily returned the Seigneur's distant salute.

'Present this gentleman to me,' said Madame de Montgenais to Elise, 'since the Seigneur has forgotten to do so.'

Elise came timidly forward.

'I have not the pleasure of knowing this gentleman's name, otherwise I should be most happy.' She turned entreatingly to the Stranger. 'Will you be good enough, monsieur, to tell me your name, in order that I may present you to Madame de Montgenais?'

'Alan Chichester,' he said, almost sulkily, for he could not lie to Elise.

On the whole, he preferred Fixture 47 to this beautiful young girl in her dainty summer costume. Perhaps the original Forty-seven would come back some day, and make his regret still deeper.

Madame de Montgenais gave a little exclamation of dismay.

'Chi—ches—ster—r—r! It makes one's teeth to splinter. Chichester—r—r? There was a Sir Alan Chichester—r who died in Paris two years ago, an English baronet.'

'My father,' the Stranger admitted.

'Then you, too, are a baronet?'

'Oh yes, I suppose I am.' The Stranger was evidently annoyed. 'I'm sorry, but it isn't my fault.'

Madame de Montgenais smiled.

'Ah, you Englishmen! A Frenchman loves a title or a decoration; an Englishman is ashamed of them.'

She looked around her with undisguised curiosity as Elise endeavoured to make peace between the broncho and the Seigneur. Rube, who had recovered from his fright, tugged away at Elise's shoe-buckle.

'Sir Alan, I am the bearer of an invitation from the Seigneur for you to dine with us to-night.'

'To dine with you! Pardon me, Madame——'

'De Montgenais. Yes, I know the invitation is short. It is imperative that it should be so. But'—she looked round with ill-repressed scorn at the homely contents of the hut—'you will be good enough to accept it without demur.'

The Stranger's eyes flashed ominously.

'Pardon me for reminding you that this is a free country, and that I am in seclusion. I must decline the honour the Seigneur would do me.'

'Oh no, you will not decline it,' she said firmly.

'Once or twice in my life, I have had occasion to appeal to the chivalry of an English gentleman. It is needless to say that I have not done so in vain.'

He bowed stubbornly.

'I am at a loss to understand you. I am ill—out of love with the world, and I prefer to remain out of it.'

'That is all very well,' she said impetuously, 'were it not that a woman's honour is concerned.'

'A woman's honour!'

'Yes, a woman's honour. It is perfectly well known to several people that Mademoiselle de Marsac has been in the habit of frequenting your hut, disguised as an Indian squaw. What construction, think you, will the world place upon that?'

'If anyone says aught that is wrong of her, he lies,' he said hotly. 'I will——'

'Tut, tut! Sir Alan. I am not the Seigneur. You cannot hold a pistol to my head as he did to yours the day before yesterday. I say that you have hopelessly compromised this romantic young girl.'

'It is untrue. I did not know——'

'It is not what you know,' she said coldly; 'it is what others know. The whole province is ringing with the scandal of the Seigneur's mad pursuit of his ward. I have come here to stop it,

and stop it I will. My presence at the château is sufficient to stay the scandal; if you and the local celebrities are received there as guests, all these vague rumours will die out as if they had never been.'

'Believe me, I am grateful to you for your consideration for this friendless girl,' he said eagerly. 'Very grateful. I was racking my stupid brains as I sat there, wondering how to rescue her from the Seigneur.'

'Don't you see that anything you could do would be but jumping her out of the frying-pan into the fire?'

'Ye—es, yes; but something must be done. If I break bread with the Seigneur, I am his guest; if I fight him, the story spreads. But I am in no mood to enter his house. I'd rather fight him.'

'You are in no mood to do this or that!' She became angry. 'Must I again tell you that Mademoiselle de Marsac is entitled to some consideration at your hands? For shame, sir!' She called to the girl.

'Elise! I am endeavouring to persuade Sir Alan to dine at the château to-night. Will you add your persuasion to mine?'

Elise's eyes fell before the Stranger's, for they were full of reproach. She suddenly became tongue-tied.

'If—if——' She shot one glance at him, and turned away.

The Seigneur leisurely joined them.

'We shall welcome you at seven, I trust. I will have the dogs tied up,' he added as an afterthought which might possibly make for the Stranger's convenience. 'They are apt to be a little prejudiced against visitors of any kind. Come, madame, we delay monsieur in the performance of his domestic duties.'

Left alone, the Stranger paced wrathfully up and down the hut. At last, Elise had found a friend; she was in no immediate danger from the Seigneur's ardent wooing. He savagely thrust his fists into his pockets, and the fingers of his left hand touched something hard: it was the necklace.

'I'd better remember I'm a champion,' he said with savage irony to the broncho, 'otherwise I might be in danger of behaving like a scoundrel. Here have I, in the most innocent manner in the world, compromised a young girl instead of helping her. If I wish to help her I must drag out civilized garb' (he cast a wrathful glance at two big leather trunks in the corner of the hut) 'and come face to face with a lot of tomfools for whom I don't care twopence. I! I! I! It is always "I." Shall I never learn to give a moment's con-

sideration to others? I'm sick of myself and everything else. If it were not for the girl, I'd bolt further afield—hide myself somewhere where I could live in peace. I feel as if something were going to happen to-night.'

All at once, he flushed scarlet.

'To think of Mademoiselle de Marsac sitting there time after time hearing the things I said about women without jumping up and letting fly at me! Shows her pluck! It would be the act of a ruffian to desert such a girl.'

He savagely unbuckled a trunk, and, as a precautionary measure before extracting his dress-clothes from it, drove Rube and his family from the hut. After dusting the table with an old rag, he put his dress-coat upon it, and began to rub out the creases. Then he found a white waistcoat without any buttons, and had to hunt round for them in the recesses of the trunk.

'That fool of a Fletcher never did know how to pack,' he said angrily. 'Wonder whether there's any polish for my evening shoes.'

When he had fitted the buttons into the waistcoat, he tried it on.

'How the dickens did I get so thin! Why, it's two inches too big!'

Then he remembered how it was that he had become so thin, and sat down unhappily on a log.

'Oh, if someone would only grab hold of me and drag me away from these shadows! Why can't I forget? Why can't I wipe it all out, start afresh, look back upon it as a dream? Oh, confound it, if I'm ever to be a man again I must pull myself together. It's now or never. Wonder how you put on this boot-polish? Oh, I see, "Take a soft leather." I must do it with a corner of my doeskin shirt. That's it. If there's a looking-glass in my dressing-bag, I'll cut off this brutal beard and shave. It's no use doing things by halves, not a bit. Of course that idiot has packed my dress-shirts at the bottom of everything. There should be a light overcoat. Even the squirrels would throw bits of stick at me if I went through the Bush without an overcoat.'

He found a pearl-gray overcoat, which also hung loosely about his wasted form. After he had put on a pair of black trousers, it took him some time to clip away his beard previous to shaving.

'They'll see my beastly weak chin,' he muttered, as he cut off one side of his beard. 'Never mind, I'm not going there under false pretences. If they want me, they'll have to take me as I am. By Jove!' He dropped his razor on the floor from the sudden shock of such a discovery. 'It's not such a bad chin after all. Seems to have

strengthened and filled out. Most hopeful thing about me I've noticed for a long time.'

He cut himself once, but, considering the time which had elapsed since his last attempt, managed to shave very passably.

'There ought to be some cosmetique just to straighten out my moustache a bit. Oh, here it is. Hands are hopeless; they're like an Indian's, and about as big,' he said ruefully. 'Fortunately, it isn't a dance. I shan't have to wear gloves.'

He re-locked his trunk, tied the broncho to the door, as a guard in whom he had confidence, and started for the château. Once, he stopped to ask himself if he were someone else. A squirrel dropped a nut on his head, and brought him back to realities. He was not the Stranger, but Alan Chichester again mingling with his fellows. Had the Seigneur remembered his promise to tie up the dogs? It would be awkward if anything happened to his only dress-suit.

True to his word, the Seigneur had secured the dogs; the château's gates stood hospitably open. He walked up the long avenue, gave his hat and coat to the Seigneur's man, and was ushered into the drawing-room. Then Elise came rustling down, a shy friendliness in her great eyes.

'I—I hope you are not sorry you came,' she said, giving him her hand.

Sir Alan bent over it. As he did so, he had a vague feeling of pity for that poor devil, the Stranger, his lonely hut, his savage broncho, his absurd cock and hens. Elise's fresh young beauty, set off with all the art of a Parisian dressmaker, was a revelation to him.

XII

THE MESSAGE

The Stranger and Elise sat on the veranda after dinner. A little wind crept up from the west and softly ruffled the curling tendrils of Elise's hair. Inside the château, the Seigneur and Father Brunot took their ease, smoking long Indian pipes and pledging one another in port which gleamed tawnily in the soft light of wax candles. The Seigneur held the bowl of his wineglass between his long fingers, and straight ened out his arm so that the blood might flow to the tips and bring the wine to a fitting temperature. Their talk was of prosaic things, such as the price of wheat. The matter of the cassock had been smoothed over, for the Seigneur, after many stumblings in painful places, had gradually learned the wisdom of expediency. Inwardly, as he watched the play of candlelight on the shining black stuff, he hoped that some disaster would befall the priest and shear him of his glory. The

Father's firm lips, tempered to a jovial leaning towards the good things of life when they came his way, parted in a smile ; for the Seigneur had choice stores of anecdote gleaned in many climes, and, now that arrears due to the Church were paid, Father Brunot possessed far too much tact to rake up the troublous past. Jardot's ignominious fate had taught the Seigneur a much-needed lesson ; there was nothing more to be said—until he needed another lesson.

As Father Brunot and the Seigneur held their respective glasses to the light, smacking their lips with gusto, a casual bystander would have taken them for bosom friends of long standing. To complete the illusion, the portrait of the Seigneur's father gazed down upon the priest with a jovial simper. In the drawing-room, Madame de Montgenais strummed a love-song on the old spinet, the thin tones of the instrument quavering through the air as though filled with the romances of the fair dames who had made it their confidante in bygone days. From time to time, she looked through the open French window at Elise and Sir Alan, then resumed her strumming with redoubled vigour. She had already conveyed to Father Brunot in half a dozen sentences, exactly how matters stood. Once, the Seigneur, irritated by the constant murmur of voices on the veranda,

half rose from his chair, only to be pressed down almost caressingly by Father Brunot, who required the feudal system of Old France to be explained to him at great length. For so wise a man, Father Brunot seemed very much at a disadvantage on this particular evening. The impatient Seigneur found himself led from subject to subject, and all the time, breaking in upon the priest's full, rich tones, came the sound of that subdued conversation from outside. He fumed inwardly, but could do nothing.

At dinner, there had been little to differentiate the Stranger from the ordinary diner-out. Here and there, perhaps, he had lost touch with the world; but Madame de Montgenais always came to the rescue with a deft clue which put him at his ease. The priest treated him as if he were a visitor at the château. As to Sir Alan being connected in any way with the Stranger who lived hermitwise at the Mill, Father Brunot never even hinted at it, but seemed to take it for granted that he was the ordinary globe-trotting Englishman, who, in his anxiety to own most of the earth, thinks it necessary to travel round it to pick out the fattest portions.

The moon swam over the tree-tops, and Elise and the Stranger, sitting in rocking-chairs on the veranda, looked down the ghostly avenue of

pines at the black masses of shadow which blotted out the river, the little lamps of fireflies wandering through the night. Marcelline, buxom, complaisant, wreathed in smiles, brought them coffee in china of Old France, deftly set it on a little table between them, and went away. The Stranger was young, rich, handsome, the wilful Elise youthful enough to be the Seigneur's daughter; all her sympathies were with youth. There was no need for a mistress at the château. Besides, Father Brunot had given her a hint to deal tenderly with Elise. Moreover, there was Madame to be reckoned with, and Madame had an imperious temper—a temper which never listened to excuses, however cunningly devised.

'I want to know about your convent life,' said the Stranger. 'It always helps one to understand people if you know what sort of lives they have led.'

'It was all a dream,' said Elise, 'the placid, uneventful life, the formal gardens with their fantastically-trimmed trees, the solemn, tender-hearted nuns who renounced so much and who chid me so gently for wanting to see beyond the convent walls. They had all lived their lives, many of them had sought refuge from grief in God's house, and I—I was too young for grief. I pined for laughter and music and joy, for the

gay bustle and glitter of busy streets, the beautiful things to be seen in the world.'

'In short, you wanted to try your wings?'

'Yes; but the nuns told me that I should one day come back to them tired of it all, after I had tasted of the pursuits and vanities of the world. Still'—she drew a deep breath—'I wanted to see, to taste, to know, to feel, to be anything but a calm, gray-robed figure without love, doing the appointed formal task, serving God with prayer instead of helping His creatures actively. And then——'

The hot tears came into her eyes.

'And then?'

'The Seigneur came to me, whisked me away, told me that it was my father's wish I should marry him, and ——'

'And?'

She looked drearily into the darkness, her white hands loosely folded in her lap.

'There is no need to say what followed. It was all self. I wanted my own happiness. I could not marry an old man. If he had only been different. But no—no.' She gazed straight ahead of her with a little shiver. 'No, I could not do it. He brought me here, and, in a mad freak, anything to get away from the desperate monotany of the place, I put on the Indian

squaw's dress—the real squaw must have gone back to her people—the one who used to live at the hut—and—you know the rest.'

'Yes, I know the rest. You must believe me that I had no intention of opening old wounds. I only wanted to hear from your own lips all that had happened to you since you left the convent.'

'Some of the girls there will never leave it!' said Elise, in awestruck tones, as a white owl, on muffled wings, floated across the moonlight. 'Some of them will die there. They have no desire to see the world, and intend to remain at the convent all their lives. What right had I to wish otherwise? Then I should have been spared all this misery, this perpetual torment and unrest.'

'You had the right of your own heart, your own instinctive knowledge of life and its meaning,' he said gently.

'But'—she leaned a little forward in her eagerness—'but I thought—I thought it was all so different—so very different.'

'You thought rightly. Now, I have a confession to make to you in my turn. I must make it before I can dare to hope that you will trust me. I have seen the world you were so eager to see, have joined in its follies with a zest, and they

are dust and ashes in my mouth. Do you know why?'

'No. Tell me.'

'You won't think me an egotist?'

'No, of course not. I want to know all about you, why you are so sad.'

He drew a long breath.

'Perhaps I'd better get it over. You are too young to know that there comes a time in the life of every man when he loves. For a little while he is possessed by his passion. To win the woman he loves, a man will dare great things; but even then he cannot hide from her his faults, his weaknesses. Sometimes, though carried away by her love for him, the woman sees them too. But the man, having once gained her love, rapidly falls from the stars; his humility deserts him, he grows arrogant, selfish, domineering. The woman sees that his feet are of clay, that he has failed to stand the test, will have none of him, and so they—part.'

'Ah!' She breathed quickly. 'They—they part? After'—there was an awestruck tenderness in her tone—'after loving one another?'

'After loving one another.'

'But'—he caught the pain in her eager young voice—'but the wickedness of it! To part! Love is of God, is eternal.'

'It should be. Sometimes it is of the earth earthy, a whim, a passing fancy, has no strength, no faith, burns out as quickly as it is kindled; and there is nothing left but the darkness.'

'Darkness?'

'Darkness. The man falls through it even as Satan fell from heaven, only he sinks lower.'

The Stranger threw away his cigar with a nervous laugh.

'If we are to be good friends, if you are ever to cherish a kindly thought of me, I must first beg your pardon for all the brutal things I have said in your presence about women. It was all self with me—nothing but self. Until I lost her, I never thought of what I must seem to the woman I loved. The sorrow of her death was as nothing compared with her treachery to me. But in the dewy silence of the Bush, I have learned to know my own heart, my own self, my own pettiness. I have reviled her, hated her, and now she rests with sightless eyes beneath the swelling bosom of the quiet earth; I have hated her even in death, because I knew myself to be unworthy of her love. All my life is empty, dark, so full of shame, so cold, so lonely, so abjectly miserable that I am grateful for the love of even the dumb animals around me. I want to go back to the world, to do something in it, to busy myself with its aims

and duties; and yet when I resolve to do this, there comes between me and the world the memory of her face. It could be gentle often, though very proud. I brought disloyalty into her heart by my own selfishness, and now, even my misery is only another form of selfishness. Had you not come to teach me a gentler, wiser knowledge of life——'

'I teach you?'

'Yes—you. You do not despair. You do not sit down and wail away the hours, or fume and fret and do nothing. I would have fought the Seigneur for your sake, to free you from his persecution. Yet I accept his hospitality, break bread with a man I despise, because I cannot bring myself to go until I have set you free from him.'

'You cannot go until you have set me free?'

'No. If I may not fight him, there are other ways by which he may be made to give up all claims to your hand.'

The girl smiled as she listened to the faint tinkling of the old spinet. And there was a great exultation in her heart that he had gradually assimilated her innocent teaching, and was learning to renounce his baser self. It was abhorrent to her that this man who had all the world before him, should fret away his life for a shadow. But he was speaking.

'In my madness, my hot anger and despair, I would not listen to her last message when it came to me. And the man has gone away. I do not know who he was; I shall never know.'

'Some day you will know,' she assured him, with sweet comfort. 'Some day the message will come back to you. The dead will speak—you will understand.'

Abashed by her own impetuosity, she dropped her eyes and leaned back in her chair.

He got up.

'As long as Madame de Montgenais is here, you are safe from the Seigneur's persecution?'

'Oh, perfectly. Please do not trouble about me. Only, we are friends, are we not?'

'It is you who are the champion,' he declared. 'You have rescued me. Remember, I still keep the necklace. This time, no one shall take it from me.'

'I shall remember.'

She gave him her hand. It lay for a moment like a flower in his broad palm. Then the Seigneur came out on the veranda, followed by Father Brunot.

'You can't have it,' said the Seigneur. 'We ought to get back our seignorial rights. Canada will never be what it was until we go back a long way before '37.'

The priest laughed jollily.

'Never look back. We must march with the times—march with the times. Ah! there is my buggy. Perhaps monsieur will do me the honour to accept a seat in it?'

The Stranger was about to decline, but a significant glance from Father Brunot made him accept the offer. When they reached the path opposite the clearing which led to the hut, the priest still drove on.

'The night is so fresh,' he said apologetically, 'that perhaps you would like me to drive you up to the village to get your mail. It is only ten o'clock. All the oddities of the village look in at the post-office for imaginary letters, and pretend to be profoundly surprised when they fail to receive any. I can assure you, monsieur, that the crowd is a representative one.'

The Stranger did not expect letters, nor was he at all interested in crowds of any kind; but, seeing that there was more in the priest's proposal than met the eye, he bowed, and expressed his delight at so unexpected an opportunity for meeting the worthies of Bonneville. When they reached the post-office it was full of people who had come in for their letters, and Father Brunot was especially careful to let everyone see who was his companion.

'My man will drive you back again,' he said, cordially shaking hands with the Stranger. 'I have not had so pleasant an evening at the Seigneur's for years. He seems to have taken a great liking to you. What a pity you must leave us so soon!'

His resonant voice almost filled the post-office, and all eyes were fixed upon them.

Father Brunot turned aside to speak to a parishioner, and the Stranger found himself being driven back towards his own domain without having had a chance to say how much longer he intended to remain at Bonneville. Everyone in the post-office, from Marcelline Leduc downwards, had seen the priest speaking to him; everyone had heard of their dining together at the château. The Stranger realised that in a few minutes the priest had done more to stop people's tongues than anyone else could have effected in a year. He also realised that he stood much higher in popular estimation than before.

Why did the priest want him to go away? He could not return to his old life; he could not forsake Elise. Besides, he liked Madame de Montgenais, and the way in which she ruled the Seigneur with a rod of iron. He sighed heavily, and turned down the path leading to the glade.

When he reached the hut, he found that the

broncho had slipped his halter and wandered off, after the manner of his kind.

'It doesn't matter,' thought the Stranger resignedly; 'he's sure to turn up again in the morning. Besides, no one except the Seigneur would try to get in here to steal anything. No one. When Rube's scared, he frightens people out of their wits.'

The Stranger sat down on a log by the fireside —the one chair which the hut contained was not very comfortable—and, taking out his pipe, began meditatively to fill it. Cigars were all very well at the château; here, a pipe seemed far more appropriate. He picked up a pine splinter, and was about to thrust its point into the smouldering fire, when his eye was caught by something white on the table.

'Curious,' he said, dropping the pine splinter, and staring at the paper with a puzzled frown. 'Someone must have been here. Just as well for him that the broncho wasn't on guard.'

He picked up the pine splinter, lit his pipe, then fetched a tin lamp from the cupboard, deeply frowning the while. Even when he had taken up the sheet of paper, he did not hold it to the light, but put the lamp on the table and went back to the log.

'What,' he murmured under his breath, 'if it be

her message come to me at last—the message I would not receive. Ah! Am I to know now? It must have cost her something to send it after my contemptuous silence.'

For a long time he held the paper in his hand without reading it, puffing mechanically at his pipe the while.

'If it should really come from her!' he murmured. 'If it should really come from her! Why awaken the old unrest, the old pain? Better thrust it into the fire unread. I'll swear it's the paper she always used. My fingers know the touch of it so well.'

He stared vaguely into the fire, without seeing that a man's face peered into the hut.

'Why re-open it all? Why not shut down the page and close it for ever? Better put it into the flames unread.'

The flames leaped up eagerly, licking the rough edges as he held the paper towards the fire. His hand drew back instinctively.

'What an infernal coward I am!' he growled. 'Living alone like this—communing with shadows—seeing ghosts in the forest paths, spectres in the waving boughs—makes one's reason totter. No; I'll read it. She shall have the last word. That fellow, her lover, must have brought it while I was away.'

He held the paper up to the light. Yes; there was the clear, delicate, sensitive handwriting, the strokes all of the same thinness. What was the message? The last poem they had read together ere they parted:

'And I think in the lives of most women and men
There's a moment when all would go smooth and even
If only the dead could find out when
To come back and be—forgiven!'

A blot partially obscured the last word, the writing trembled, wavered, until it was almost illegible.

His hand fell to his side; a little gust of wind blowing in through the open door caught the paper; it dropped into the fire, flared up for a moment, then died down to gray ash. The Stranger sat turned to stone. When he looked up, a man stood in the doorway—the Other Man—the man who had brought him the message.

He rose mechanically. The Other Man looked down upon him with eyes of hate.

'You have read it?'

'Yes; I have read it.'

'She wanted you to forgive her, only she couldn't live to be forgiven. The end came very quickly.'

His voice faltered for a moment, but he choked

it back, looking at his rival with the intense stare of unwavering hate.

'She has forgiven me. I have forgiven her. God rest her soul in peace.'

'You cur!' said the Other Man, with the same intense scorn. 'You broke her heart with your damned selfishness while she lived, and you burn her last message to you.'

'N—no!'

'She broke off with you though she loved you, to make a man of you. She thought sorrow would show you what an overbearing brute you had been, and that you would come back to her a new man. But she died—waiting. You never came back.'

'No, I never went back. And you!' The Stranger's dry lips scarcely framed the words. 'You! What were you to her?'

'I!' The Other Man's concentrated scorn cut the air like a whip. 'I was nothing to her, but I loved her. To please her, when she knew herself to be dying, I promised to bring that message to you. The first time, you would not hear it, so I waited until to-night. To-night, you cannot escape it.'

'Why—why do you come to-night?'

'I have watched you for weeks past. I began, fool that I was, to think you were sorry—that you

mourned for her—that your solitary life meant repentance, and to-night you saunter along to the château without a care. Don't stand there with your white sheep's face staring at me, or I shall strike you!'

'Strike!'

The Stranger stood before him defenceless.

'She is dead,' cried the Other Man; 'you have killed her. Get your revolver and come into the moonlight. I will kill you or you shall kill me!'

The Stranger followed him into the moonlight, holding a revolver loosely in his left hand. He leaned against the trunk of a tree as the Other Man measured twenty paces, and tearing his handkerchief in two, laid the white strips at each end of the measured distance.

'Now,' he said, returning to the Stranger, 'you will go to your side of the glade, I will go to mine, and we will advance until we each gain our respective marks, then fire. Once will be sufficient.'

'Yes,' said the Stranger dully. 'Once will be sufficient.'

He turned and walked back to the opposite side. The Other Man, without wasting words, did the same.

They neared the marks at the same time, the Stranger still carrying his revolver loosely by his

side. The Other Man fired, and the Stranger fell, face forward, on the turf. The Other Man, with an oath, flung his revolver into the mill-stream, and hurried away.

The Stranger remained senseless on the ground, the blood welling from a wound in his side. The Other Man, as if drawn by some irresistible impulse, retraced his steps, and picked up the Stranger's revolver. It was unloaded.

'Murder!' cried the Other Man. 'Murder!' echoed the thousand voices of the night; and the Other Man rushed away into the recesses of the Bush.

XIII

FATHER BRUNOT EXPLAINS

EARLY the next morning, Father Brunot, after having looked in upon Jardot just to see that he was fulfilling his obligations to the Church, strolled leisurely down the path which led to the Stranger's hut.

If the Stranger needed enlightenment, he, Father Brunot, was quite prepared to afford him all necessary information ; but the worthy Father was not prepared to find the Stranger stretched upon the ground in a semi-conscious condition. Potent as the Seigneur's port was, the young man had scarcely touched it, although Father Brunot and the Seigneur had accounted for a couple of cobweb-encrusted bottles between them. The broncho, who was on guard at the entrance of the hut after a night's wandering through the Bush, during which he had sought congenial society, stared at him a little doubtfully, but, after a lengthened survey, concluded that the Church

had privileges denied to ordinary mortals, and allowed Father Brunot to approach the prostrate Stranger.

The Father was a man of action. In a trice he had the Stranger's head on his knee, and forced some whisky between his teeth. The Stranger swallowed with difficulty, as Father Brunot spoke words of kindly encouragement.

'Shock of the bullet; it's glanced off something hard on to the rib and left a flesh wound,' said the Father to himself, carefully carrying the Stranger to the hut, and putting a blanket beneath his head before he bandaged the wound.

The battered necklace, which had deflected the bullet and saved the Stranger's life, fell from his breast-pocket as Father Brunot gently laid him down.

Father Brunot put it back in the Stranger's pocket and redoubled his exertions.

'Ah, he's coming round now. He'll be all right in a little while. I'd better light a fire and get him some breakfast. Queer how a man of position and influence in the world can come down to living here for the sake of a sentiment. A priest, from the mere fact of being a priest, is shut out from half the complications and entanglements which fill the lives of ordinary men. Though he

is denied their joys, he is also spared their sorrows. On the whole, I have chosen the better part—the better part.'

He tucked up his cassock, and fetched some wood from a pile outside — a pile generally occupied by Rube as a resting-place when fatigued by the arduous labours of the day. Rube, who was always fascinated by anything metallic, followed Father Brunot into the hut, and looked at himself in the priest's shining buckles. After the priest had lit the fire, he made coffee, and boiled some eggs in a little tin saucepan, Rube (he seemed to be under the impression that this was an expeditious method of hatching out) watching the proceedings, his head cocked knowingly on one side.

When the breakfast was ready, Father Brunot came back to the Stranger, hoisted him into a sitting position, and propped his back against the wall with more blankets.

'Now, my son,' he said kindly, as the Stranger, with a bewildered air, endeavoured to speak, 'just eat your breakfast first, and I'll talk to you afterwards. Nothing in the world is so bad as to encounter a sorrow when you're not in a fit physical condition to meet it. The shock of that bullet must have reduced you to a very weak state. Eat and be strong again. You'll be all

right in a day or two. The wound is nothing in itself.'

'But, Father, I am a Protestant, not one of your flock. Why trouble yourself about me?'

The Stranger spoke heavily, for he still saw the Other Man advancing towards him in the moonlight.

'My son'—Father Brunot laid his gorgeous silk bandanna across his knees, and peered benevolently over his spectacles at the Stranger—'whether you are a Protestant or a Catholic, you have come into the scheme of things; and someone must look after you, even though you want to shoot yourself, or fight with others. Try an egg. There is much virtue in an egg—when it is fresh. You have had a narrow escape. Thank God for sparing you, and eat. It is only villains and cowards who cannot eat.'

The Stranger, still half dazed, his hair damp with dew, stretched out a reluctant hand for the egg which the priest handed to him in an old tin spoon.

'Ah!' The priest drew it back. 'I'll prepare it for you Canadian fashion. One side of you must be too sore for you to lift an arm easily.'

He took the egg, cracked it in two, scooped the contents into a tumbler, seasoned it with pepper

and salt, cut a slice of bread-and-butter, and brought the tumbler to the Stranger.

'Eat,' he said, with kindly severity. 'No man can face either the ills or joys of life without eating;' and put a friendly arm round the wounded man—an arm which throbbed with muscular power.

Although the exertion pained him, the Stranger mechanically began to eat. When he had swallowed a few mouthfuls, the priest brought him some hot coffee, almost black.

'I couldn't find any milk,' he said. 'Perhaps it is better without.'

Father Brunot ate a couple of eggs himself, and threw the shells to Rube, who stalked indignantly out of the hut. Although he could eat most things, he had not yet come down to swallowing eggshells.

After breakfast was over, Father Brunot cleared away the remnants of food, replenished the fire with a bundle of aromatic tamarack, and helped the Stranger to his feet.

'Just sit on this log in the sunshine, and I'll fetch you a bucket of water from the mill-stream.'

Again tucking in his cassock, Father Brunot, first picking up the two tell-tale strips of handkerchief from the ground and putting them in his

pocket, strode down to the mill-stream for a pail of water.

'Every Englishman who ever lived,' he said cheerfully, 'carries about with him a sponge bigger than his own head.' He went into the hut. 'Ah, I thought so. Here it is. Now, my son, if you will have the goodness to kneel down on the turf and plunge your head into this pail, you will feel better.'

He handed the Stranger the sponge, and steadied him as the latter plunged his head into the ice-cold water. Then the priest took the wet sponge, undid the bandage, and gently washed the torn flesh over the bruised rib.

The dull, glassy look passed away from the Stranger's eyes. He took the priest's arm, buttoned his shirt at the throat, and went back to the log, passing his hand over his forehead in a bewildered kind of way.

'You are very good,' he said feebly—'very good. I did not expect, after our parting last night, to see you so soon. Why do you take so much interest in a stranger?'

'You are not a stranger,' said the priest quietly. 'I knew you were coming here before you came; I know of everything you have done since, and I have waited until——' He paused expressively.

'Until?'

'Until it was time to interfere.'

'To interfere?'

'Yes,' placidly said the priest. 'I am afraid, though, that I had not reckoned on what evidently happened last night. The Other Man is so impetuous—nearly mad, in fact. You see, so long as you lived, he had no chance. Then, Madeleine Ivry died before he could kill you.'

'How is it, Father, that you know everything?'

'You don't suppose for one instant, my son, that I am so indifferent to the welfare of my flock as not to know everything that concerns them?'

'But how should I concern you in any way? I am a Protestant.'

'So much the worse for you,' said the priest philosophically. 'If I thought there was any chance of making you a son of the true Church I would not rest until I had brought you safely into the fold; but you are a Protestant to the backbone—it is in your blood; and we are all, in a measure, some more than others, creatures of heredity.'

'My side aches. I think I'll lie down again.'

'Ah, my son, your heart aches more than your

side. You need not trouble to tell me anything. I know all.'

'All?'

'Yes, all. I know that you met Mademoiselle Ivry in Montreal, became engaged to her, that she broke off the engagement in London, and returned to Belaine to die. I know that, in spite of this disillusion, she hoped you would follow her. She had broken the engagement as a desperate means of bringing you to the knowledge that self was your god. I know that you refused to receive her last message, and that she died of rapid consumption.'

'You know all this? How?'

'It is not far from Bonneville to Belaine,' said the priest, 'and I administered the last rites of the Church to her at Belaine, which is the seat of her family. The message was given by her to me the day before she died, to hand to the Other Man —her cousin—the last words she ever wrote.'

'The last words!'

'The last words,' said the priest sadly. 'She knew all the time that any sudden emotion might cause her malady to break out; that she ought to have told you of it; but when she came to know you better she feared to do so, lest you should leave her. But at the last she felt that, unless she left you, your egotism would make you reproach

her if you discovered the truth. Her dream was that, finding yourself abandoned by her, the shock of it might make you all that she hoped. It was a foolish and desperate expedient; but when a woman knows herself to be dying she has not always time to think wisely. The shadow cast by Death's wings sometimes obscures our vision.'

'Was I so—bad?'

Looking back, he knew that he had lived solely for his own pleasure and happiness, and not for Madeleine Ivry.

'No; she was a trifle morbid; you were the average man. It was because she wanted you to be more than the average man that she acted in such a way. She had not realized how difficult it is for frail human nature to soar beyond the average. Now, my son, you have trodden the dolorous road almost long enough, and your life has been spared for something better. Do you still hate the memory of the woman who loved you well enough to do as she did? Do you think such a course gave her no pain, no suffering?'

The Stranger looked up at the priest's earnest face.

'I see a little light. With much sorrow comes wisdom, with much pain, humility. Had she

lived, I would have proved that a love like hers can raise a man from the stepping-stones of a dead self to nobler things, and, in seeking her happiness, I should have found my own. Now I cannot atone; it is too late. I would fain renounce the world and walk humbly before God —the God of Madeleine Ivry.'

'My son!' The priest towered to his full height; his somewhat commonplace features became impressive. 'My son, you have sought to escape from your sorrow by partially withdrawing yourself from the haunts of men. In the Valley of Mahota there is a community of men who have wholly renounced the world, many of them for the same reason which prompted you to evade your responsibilities. Unlike you, these holy men —these martyrs of conscience—give themselves up to the service of God. They cannot, even though their spirits quail at such a lot, retrace their steps. Go, dwell among them, study them in silence, watch their sufferings, their patient prayers at the foot of the Cross, their daily mortification of the flesh, their abstention from all carnal desires. Then return and tell me whether you have realized what it means to lead the solitary life, to die unwept, unknown, to be resolved into the elements, and pass away, leaving less trace behind you than sunlight on a forest pool. Day

by day, as you watch these men—these Trappists of Mahota—who, being alive, are yet dead—you will understand that the alleviation of their sorrows is their work, prayer, intercession for the sins of the world. If you do not pray for the world, you must work for it, or lose your own soul. There is no middle course. God is a just God, and will have no half-measures. Go to the Trappist Monastery at Mahota, and—decide!'

'Ah!' said the Stranger with a sigh. 'If one could only undo the past.'

'There is to be no whining about the past,' said the priest sternly. 'Mademoiselle Ivry would have died in any event. Your sorrow for her is but a preparation for the duties of life—a preparation which shall make you worthy of them. You must go to Mahota for a little while until events have ripened.'

'But Mademoiselle de Marsac! I have promised never to desert her,' the Stranger explained. 'Am I to break my faith with all women? I cannot go.'

'I will explain to her,' said the priest gently. 'Go to Mahota for a couple of months in order to find your soul. I give you my word as priest and man that no harm shall befall her. It was I who sent Madame de Montgenais to her aid;

it was I who set the Seigneur's creditors in motion.'

'You! Why?'

'My son, the Seigneur has done much evil, has led a life of vicious indulgence; his example has caused others to stray, has sapped the influence of the Church. He is a danger to himself and to everyone else around him. With my assistance, Madame de Montgenais will take him in hand. This was a happy place once. The neighbours loved one another. The Seigneur has altered all that, has brought sorrow, shame, oppression into many households. It is necessary, therefore, that the Seigneur should himself alter.'

'You pledge me your word that he shall not molest or annoy Mademoiselle de Marsac in any way?'

'I pledge you my word. Within three months, if I were able to raise the necessary money, I could reduce the Seigneur to a condition of lamblike docility; but I am a poor priest, and have no means.'

The Stranger raised his eyes to the priest's glowing ones.

'I am a rich man. I, too, had thought of a plan, which my representative in Montreal is carrying out for me. Perhaps I had better say

no more. We both appear to be striving for the same end.'

The priest looked piercingly at him.

'Better say no more,' he declared. 'When you return I will listen to your plan. Perhaps it is the same as my own.'

XIV

THE MEETING

As the Stranger mournfully finished his packing, he looked round the little hut with a feeling of intense regret. The place had been a home to him; many things had happened there; it was partly the work of his own creative hands; and now he must once more wander, bitterly conscious that no exile from his country can flee from himself. Wherever he might go, or whatever he might do, for the next two months there would always be the same potent factors in determining his actions. The priest left him free to choose, only, according to Father Brunot's showing, it was essential that he should temporarily quit Bonneville. He did not want to leave Bonneville—even for a couple of months; he had grown fond of the place; and in his present half-dazed condition, it would be a painful effort to adapt himself to fresh surroundings.

For the last few months, the Stranger felt that

he had been living in a nightmare. He was a man who, walking through gloom, sees gradually dawning at the end of some shadowy vista a faint beam of light which grows brighter the nearer he approaches it. Hitherto, he had always taken himself for granted; it had never occurred to him to dissect himself. With the average Englishman's belief that this was the best of all possible worlds, he had failed to realize that he had thoughtlessly dissipated so comfortable an optimism. Now he was beginning, as one who sees through a glass darkly, to perceive that the only sanity of outlook is when a man, while he is not prepared to aver that this is the best of all possible worlds, is, nevertheless, prepared to act on the belief that it is becoming so, and that every individual act of heroism or unselfishness hastens the coming of it; that the best key of the universe is the moral nature of humanity; that a moral idea acted out brings an immediate response from the universe; that in order to have the best of the world's gifts come back to you, you must also give to the world of your own best.

But he had not given of his best to Madeleine Ivry. Rather had he absorbed all the best that she could give him, taking her love, her devotion, as a right, feeling that it was a proper tribute to

himself. He knew now that he had never really loved her; that she had attracted his pride, vanity, love of conquest; that he had given her little or nothing in return for her love—a love which had been the whole of her life and only an episode in his. In view of his present enlightenment, therefore, it was no surprise that the best had not come back to him. The best of the world's gifts could only come to him after long probation and self-denial, after many inward searchings, after much bitterness of spirit, after much abnegation of self. It had all flashed upon him whilst confronting the Other Man. The Other Man was the embodiment of a certain crude justice, the result of his own acts. Hence, his willingness to submit to the punishment, to face almost certain death unarmed. Now the Other Man had done with him. He would blot out the Other Man from his memory also. In reality, the Other Man had been his best friend, had taught him how to pay part of the price. The mere accident of the necklace being in his breast-pocket had turned the Other Man's bullet. The mere ac——!

Stay! Was it an accident? He recalled Father Brunot's phrase about the 'Scheme of Things.' No; it was no accident. The coming of Elise to the hut, the events which had followed,

were all parts of the Scheme. Believing himself to be a free agent, thinking only of himself, he had not realized how entirely he was changed, how he had been cleansed from the dross of life by the fact that a woman had purposely wounded his self-love in order to awaken the better part of him. It all seemed trite and simple enough. Life was not the complex thing that people imagined. There were only the eternal verities, the ignoring of which brought prompt punishment and disaster. He would ignore them no longer, not for fear of the punishment which might ensue if he were to do so, but because they appealed to him with an irresistible force, a clamant power. Then he knelt down in the little hut and prayed to the God of the dead woman for pardon. Her love had been great; surely her forgiveness would be great also. When he possessed everything that the world could give him, friends, position, wealth, power, she had suddenly shown him that he owned naught, that he was an illusion, a shadow, and that nothing could save him from himself unless his eyes were opened.

After he had finished his preparations for departure, he sat thinking, whilst the evening shadows brooded around him and the mill-stream murmured softly in his abstracted ears. Elise would come no more to the hut. He must see

her before he set forth on his wanderings. The Seigneur would, in all probability, decline to allow him an interview with her. In the circumstances, he could not demand one. For some occult reason, the Seigneur dare not openly express his real sentiments; but in the absence of Father Brunot, not even Madame de Montgenais could prevent him from cutting off all communication between Elise and himself. The necklace in the Stranger's pocket was a constant reproach until he explained his movements to Elise. Perhaps Jardot could help him. He would go to Jardot and find out. With his aid, it might be possible to get into the grounds and see Elise for a few minutes. Her cup of despair would be filled to the brim if she imagined him to have proved false.

He left his neatly-packed belongings and hastily started towards Jardot's cabane, guided in his short-cut through the Bush by the melancholy wailings of that enthusiast's fiddle. Margot, coquettishly dressed, beaming with health and energy, and smiling with that satisfaction which comes from the command of most of the material wants of life, sat in a rocker, quizzing Jardot as his fiddle weirdly protested against the lack of sympathy in the poet's environment.

'Sympathy! sympathy! sympathy! Always

this want of sympathy. Chop wood until you feel better. You make me tired. The man who works finds all nature sympathetic.'

Jardot paused, bow in hand, with a grin which showed his perfect teeth.

'Chop wood, Margot? What is the good of chopping wood when the Seigneur will not buy any more from me? I have lost my manhood. I am a puppet, a child. You buffet me one way —I bang up against Father Brunot; he cuffs me —I slam into the Seigneur; the Seigneur kicks me—I stumble into the arms of this owl of a Stranger who——'

'Will buy all the wood you want to sell, good friend,' said the Stranger, bowing to Margot.

Margot looked at him with smiling eyes.

'M'sieu, you have come à la bonne heure. Merci. Although I am sitting close to him, Jardot feels that he lacks sympathy to-night. My —my sympathy was going to take the form of breaking his screech-owl fiddle just to silence him, for he has conjured up with it all the lovers I might have married: the fat farmer from L'Orient, the avocat from Fermelin, the captain from Quebec. Pouf! A dozen more of them stand beseechingly asking me why I throw myself away on such a man—a man who brings the tears to my eyes, and makes me feel so sorry for myself.'

And Margot's look at the Stranger would have melted a heart of stone.

'Ah, Madame Margot,' said the Stranger, 'you do him an injustice. I wouldn't give Jardot's little finger for the lot of them. He knows your worth so much better than they can ever do.'

'That is just like an Englishman,' protested Margot, with a toss of her pretty head. 'Are you too young, m'sieu, to know that a woman values a compliment far more than a tribute to her worth?'

'V'la!' growled Jardot. 'You see madame's vanity! All because, in a rash moment, I have once or twice untruthfully praised her good looks.'

'Untruthfully? Once or twice? Oh-h! Monstre! Ingrat!' She boxed Jardot's ears and turned with a merry laugh to the Stranger. 'He only pretends, m'sieu, he does not know how unreasonably kind the good God has been in giving me to him. Besides, my dot, m'sieu! My—— dot! A feather bed, twelve geese, a cow, and Gran'père Labelle's blessing, which, as blessings go——'

'Ought to have counted for something, but didn't,' growled Jardot. 'Hold your tongue, you black-eyed witch, or I shall——'

'Will what?' She wheeled round saucily, her arms akimbo. 'What will you do, you faithless robber of farmers, notaries, and captains of Quebec?'

'Kiss you into silence!'

The easily mollified Jardot lifted her in his arms as if she had been a feather, and kissed her heartily.

'Before m'sieu, too! M'sieu, he is a savage of the woods. He knows no shame. Take him away, I beg of you, until he learns to value me as——'

'The mother of the little brown bébés,' suggested the Stranger.

'Ouf! These brown bébés! Always these brown bébés! Little gadflies! They interfere between husband and wife,' protested Margot, with a smile which belied her words. 'What with the little brown bébés there'—she pointed inside the cabane—'and the great black one out here'—shaking a menacing finger at Jardot—'I could sit down and weep. Take him away, m'sieu, and teach him a little sense, or I shall spoil my eyes.'

'Ange de diable, I leave you for five minutes and you cry your eyes out,' laughed Jardot. 'Come, m'sieu, if you wish to save my life, take me away from this termagant.'

'If I did so,' said the Stranger gravely, 'it would only be to show how impossible for you life would be without her.'

Margot shot a quick, surprised look at him, and executed a mocking pirouette in front of Jardot.

'There, b'nhomme! Now you see what m'sieu thinks of me, you great bébé of Bonneville, you climber up to women's windows. You never climbed to mine, Jardot.'

'You never gave me time. You always came down,' declared Jardot with evident truthfulness.

'Ah, well, that's all a woman gets by being kind to a man. Take him away, m'sieu. He compromises me. I have no use for him.'

'If you can spare him for a little while; that is why I came here,' said the Stranger gratefully.

'Nay, m'sieu, I did but jest.'

Margot instantly took the alarm as Jardot, with a relieved air, drew on his coat.

'Where are you going with this innocent, m'sieu?' she demanded.

'Up to the château, with your permission.'

'And without it, eh? La, la, la! Can't you do your own lovemaking without this clumsy Jardot to help you, m'sieu?'

'He knows the dogs. I don't. They would eat me. Jardot is too tough; they will let him alone.'

Margot began to laugh.

'You talk to the lady while Jardot amuses the dogs, eh?'

'Exactly.'

'Very well, m'sieu, you may take him. Only see that the great stupid does not get into mischief. In such circumstances, he prefers to be at the top of the tree, and not at the foot. Ah, I know him, the—poet.'

The Stranger promised to take care of Jardot, although inwardly convinced that Jardot would take care of him. This time the revolver was loaded. It did not seem fair that the Seigneur should be the only man in Bonneville who carried so unanswerable an argument.

They went through the dewy silence of the Bush, scattering before them all those small animals which shun the light and seek their meat fearfully betwixt the sunset and the dawn. Jardot was gloomy and oppressed, the Stranger thoughtful. He did not like to tell Jardot of his approaching departure, well knowing of that whimsical worthy's attachment to him. While he was still deliberating how to begin, Jardot stopped on the outskirts of the Bush, and motioned to the Stranger

to stay where he was. Drawing a little bottle from his pocket, he poured its contents on two lumps of fresh meat, and disappeared.

As he waited in the shadows, the Stranger heard the baying of the hounds change to a joyous whimper. In a little while, Jardot returned as noiselessly as he had set out.

'The dogs are asleep,' he grinned, and put the little empty bottle back into his pocket.

'You haven't killed them?' asked the Stranger in alarm. 'Mademoiselle Elise is fond of the poor brutes.'

'Killed them! Oh no, m'sieu. They are friends of mine, too. I have only put them to sleep for a couple of hours; they will awake with a headache, that is all. Come this way.'

He led the way down the long avenue until they came out on the lawn in front of the château. A light shone in the tower window, and Jardot pointed it out with a significant gesture.

'Eh, bien, m'sieu, we have arrived. The light is a signal that mademoiselle receives. You will climb up the tree. The lattice is just big enough for her to put her head through.'

He threw a pebble up at the window without result, then tried again. A smothered cry con-

vinced him that Elise had heard the signal. She hurriedly shaded the light, opened the window, and breathed softly down :

'Has anything happened? Is that you, Jardot?'

'Oui, mademoiselle. I am desolated to disturb you, but I bring you a visitor.'

'A visitor! At this hour! Cannot he wait until to-morrow?'

'No; it is important, mademoiselle. We are obliged to come at night; otherwise the Seigneur may not approve of us; and when the Seigneur does not approve of people, he is not mealy-mouthed in telling them so.'

Elise hesitated, well knowing who was her visitor.

'Take care,' she breathed, still more softly. 'The Seigneur will make his rounds presently, and he has been very restless of late. Besides, he is always armed. If I had wings, I would come down.'

'Mademoiselle has only to unfold them,' suggested Jardot: for the picture of the 'yellow woman' floating earthward appealed to his imagination. 'She needs only faith to fly, if she can get through the window.'

Elise laughed, then checked herself.

'But I cannot. As you know, it is barred. I

am not so ethereal as you poets would have me believe. What is it you want, Jardot?'

'M'sieu the Stranger would speak with you on matters of importance. I will sit at the foot of the tree,' whispered Jardot, 'while he climbs up. I am here to play propriety, mademoiselle;' and Jardot, seating himself at the foot of the tree, motioned the Stranger to swarm up it. 'Some men sit at the foot of the tree while others climb for the fruit,' he added philosophically. 'Eh, bien, I owe him some reparation for calling him an owl. This should entitle me to a receipt in full.'

The Stranger, getting on Jardot's brawny shoulders, climbed the tree until his head was on a level with the window.

'I must apologize for troubling you, mademoiselle,' he said formally; 'but I am going away in the morning, and I——'

'Going away?' Elise forgot her fears and came to the window. 'You promised——'

'Listen to me,' said the Stranger gently. 'There is no need for alarm. Not the slightest. Father Brunot has taken the matter in hand. He counsels my absence for a brief while. In the meantime, he guarantees that you shall not be molested by the Seigneur in any way.'

'But how can he guarantee that? He is not always here.'

'Oh, he and Madame de Montgenais have taken the Seigneur in hand. Between them, they will transform the wolf into a lamb.'

'I never did believe in mutton made of wolf,' protested Elise somewhat dubiously.

'I assure you that it will be so. I wanted to explain this so that you may not think I have broken my word to you. I could not go without saying good-bye.'

'It was not necessary,' said Elise proudly. 'I trust you, monsieur. But your voice is faint. What is the matter? Are you ill? You are keeping something from me?'

The solicitude in her tone was new to the Stranger and thrilled him to the heart. He hesitated.

'It is nothing,' he said at last; and told her how he had come by his hurt. 'It helps me to bury the past, and is the final act of the drama.'

'No,' she said, with a little shudder of relief at his having escaped so serious a danger; 'it is only the beginning. But if you had died, I should never——'

She checked herself.

'I should have died had it not been for this.'

He drew the gold necklace from his pocket; it shone in the moonlight, and one of the little miniatures was dinted where it had deflected the bullet.

'It was well that you did not insist on my returning your property to you, mademoiselle. It saved my life.'

Elise took it from him, with a quick wrench of her strong little wrists broke it in two, and gave him back the uninjured half. The other, she thrust into her bosom.

'But you meant to desert me! You are but a recreant after all.'

'It was the only reparation I could make. I was taken by surprise.'

'And the dead comes between the living! You love her still?'

'I love her memory better than I loved her. I owe her much; she was a good woman.'

Elise drew petulantly away from the window.

'And I am but a girl—a girl who talks to a man at her window. I understand. Go, monsieur. Go, I beg of you. I am sorry you came. It was unnecessary.'

But the light of his grave eyes drew her back again.

'I am sorry,' she murmured. 'I am sorry. You were content to risk your life and leave me. It was not well.'

The moonlight filtered in through the sombre branches upon her sweet upturned face with its suspicion of tears. Ordinarily Elise held herself well in hand; but this mysterious, melancholy young hermit interested her. She had delighted to think that he was so near; that, if needs be, she could fly to him to save her from the Seigneur's rough wooing. Now he was going away. She had no power to keep him at her side. And he was leaving her because of that fat Father Brunot, whose penetrating eyes saw everything. But he was convinced of Father Brunot's good faith, and he would return. She smiled as she put both hands through the little lattice.

'It is hard for me to remember that I am a woman grown; I am still a child in many things.'

'We are all children of a larger growth.'

But he smiled down upon her.

'You will come back soon?' she asked eagerly.

'I will come back soon. Hush—h! What's that?'

There was the sound of a scuffle below and

the hurried discharge of a pistol; then Jardot's voice:

'Permit me to escort you to the house, Seigneur. If you do not come quickly, I fear that this pistol will go off again. The next time, it will not miss.'

'Take the thing from the back of my neck, fool!' growled the Seigneur. 'What were you doing at the foot of this tree? I took you for someone else.'

'I have no time to answer your questions.'

Jardot's voice faded away as he escorted the Seigneur to the other side of the house.

'Go!' cried Elise. 'Go! He must not suspect you are here. That is why Jardot is forcing him away.'

The Stranger took the little white hand she extended to him, gently touched it with his lips, slipped down the tree, and was at the gate before Jardot joined him.

'Your arm! Quick! Your arm!' Jardot gasped. 'I—I'm wounded—bleeding like a pig. He shot me in the arm. Said he took me for you, and felt it his duty to fire first and explain afterwards.'

With one arm round his waist, the Stranger gradually got Jardot away. Presently the latter's

trembling feet refused to carry him; he sank in a limp heap to the ground.

'Excuse me, m'sieu, for staining your clo——' He fainted.

Lifting him up, the Stranger carried Jardot back to Margot, the blood dripping from a wound high above the elbow. Although Jardot had fainted from loss of blood, the wound was not dangerous.

As they neared the cabane, Jardot opened his eyes, and the Stranger was surprised to hear him chuckle.

'Carry me in and lay me on the floor at Margot's feet. Then she will be sorry.'

The Stranger carried him into the little cabane and struck a light. Jardot groaned and raised himself on his elbow with a heart-breaking cry of 'Margot! Margot!'

There was a tumultuous rush and swirl of airy draperies, and Margot burst into the room.

'Nom de Dieu! What is the matter? Jardot! Jardot!'

'Angel of my heart,' melodramatically said Jardot in an artistically trembling voice, 'I have shed my blood in his defence. See! This blood! It is real! Real! Drips from my veins. Am

I not a hero—a champion? It flows from me by the quart!'

Margot leaned against the doorpost with a wild burst of hysterical yet relieved laughter.

'Was there ever such a man?' she said admiringly to the Stranger, quite forgetting the scantiness of her costume.

'Of course not,' said Jardot, staggering to the whisky jug and taking a long pull. 'I have saved his life, but I say little about it. We heroes do not talk—we act.'

'And drink! So it seems. Jardot, you are a farceur, but I love you.'

'Kiss me, Margot. The wound may prove——'

Margot, about to embrace her melodramatic spouse, caught sight of her bare feet, and fled into the other room, hastily gathering the trailing garments of the night around her as she ran.

The Stranger stayed to bind up Jardot's wound.

'It will be safer for you to come with me,' he said kindly, 'until things have settled down a little. Next time the Seigneur will not miss. You must have half choked him; I know that grip of yours. Say good-bye to your wife and come to me at daybreak. We will leave Father

Brunot to set matters right. Not too much whisky, mind, or you'll get a fever.'

He heard Margot's sobs as Jardot entered the other room and sought to comfort her ; then went back to the hut and waited.

At dawn, a rather haggard and wan Jardot joined him.

'Where do we go, m'sieu?' he asked submissively. 'I am at your disposal. For you, I forsake my wife and family. For you, I am ready to become a wanderer on the face of the earth. For you, I give up everything. I do not boast of it, but it is a fact.'

The Stranger considered.

'It may be well to meditate on our future state and learn how to hold our tongues, Jardot. Father Brunot seemed to think that it would be a good thing for me to get away from here for a time. We will go down to the Trappists at Mahota. I hear that their conversational powers are not great. Still, you can talk to them with your fiddle, if they will allow you to have it with you.'

Jardot made a wry face as the Stranger put a pack-saddle on the broncho.

'Margot will feed the fowls,' he said heroically. 'Allons! the day is breaking. I will teach those

Trappists to talk. I will lure them back into the world. I will describe Margot to them. Even a Trappist will forsake his cell to see her. Let us go.'

They set out and, following the course of the river by easy stages, on the evening of the next day came in sight of the Trappist Monastery at Mahota, an edifice of black stone halfway up the mountain-side. A sweet-faced, brown-garbed brother, who was standing by the little stream which ran through the valley, greeted them in silence, in silence led the pony to a comfortable stable, in silence brought them back to the Refectory, in silence showed them their rooms, where the brother in charge of the hostelry looked questionably at Jardot's fiddle, until that worthy hid it under his coat. Then—for he was allowed to speak to the monastery guests—he told them briefly the rules of the community, and went away.

'Now,' said the Stranger, in a subdued whisper, 'you will become a new man, Jardot. What do you think of it?'

Jardot flung himself on his bed as the chapel bell began to toll.

'Alas, m'sieu, I don't want to think of it! It makes me sad for my little brown bébés.' He

stopped his ears. 'There is no music in it. If it goes on much longer, I shall howl. Ah! ah! Where is my p'tite Gabrielle? I can see Margot weeping for me on the veranda as the moon climbs up into the sky and she is all alone. Alone! M'sieu, it is a sacrifice sublime! Sublime!'

The Stranger, feeling rather ashamed of having separated Jardot from his family, did his best to comfort him. In the middle of the night, he was awakened by the sound of muffled music. Jardot, his fiddle under the bedclothes, played softly to 'the little brown bébés' the air with which he usually lulled them to sleep.

'They call to me! They yearn for me!' he apologetically explained; 'and Margot also. Hark! Don't you hear it? "À la claire fontaine!"'

'À what, Jardot?'

'"À la claire fontaine," m'sieu;' and he began to sing:

'"À la claire fontaine,
M'en allant promener,
J'ai trouve l'eau si belle
Que je m'y suis baigner!
Lui y'a longtemps que je t'aime,
Jamais je ne t'oublierai."'

The bell on the monastery tower rang solemnly

out. In the distance the great organ thundered and swelled, drowning the faint strains of Jardot's puny instrument. Hastily drawing aside the curtains, the Stranger looked down into the courtyard as the long procession of Trappists and lay brothers, with bowed heads and folded hands, stole silently across the open space and was swallowed up in the dark shadow of the church. Soon, a chorus of hoarse voices mingled with the music of the organ. It was the wild, despairing cry of these 'Children of Sorrow' to the God who had accepted their sacrifice, and before whom they nightly crucified themselves.

As he listened to this agonized appeal from earth to heaven, the Stranger shuddered.

'Not that, O God! Not that! For a little while give me strength to abide here, to endure in silence, but shut me not out for ever from kindly human speech. Give me to taste of life's woes, make me despised of men ; but rob me not of the touch of a woman's hand, the babble of children's voices. Why, Jardot! Jardot! What's the matter?'

Jardot clutched the Stranger's arm with convulsive grip.

'Think you, m'sieu, the good God has forgotten that they were little brown bébés once? Surely

all the mothers in Paradise must weep at His footstool and pray for their release.'

Jardot hid his head in his hands. The moon went out, and darkness was upon the face of the deep.

XV

THE FIRE

NEARLY three months had passed since the Stranger's arrival at Mahota. A week of perpetual silence and separation from his beloved Margot, supplemented by an exclusively vegetable diet, drove the mercurial Jardot almost crazy, and, with many apologies to the Stranger, he fled back to his little brown bébés, returning once a fortnight on the broncho to see that all went well with his taciturn friend.

Winter was close at hand, and still there came no word from Father Brunot. Occasionally the Stranger received letters from the outer world, many of them relating to the Seigneur's pecuniary embarrassments, in which he appeared to take a keen interest. Most of his time, however, was occupied in living the actual life of these rigid recluses of Mahota. Unlike them, he cherished the hope of returning to the world. And the

more he lived the dreary life of an anchorite, with its appalling monotony, its endless discomforts and joyless days, its constant pin-pricks and petty mortifications, the more he thought of the world—the world with its sunshine and music, its men and women and little children, its thousand aims and pursuits, its hopes and loves, its laughter and joy. Shut out from it all in the rigid seclusion of Mahota, he forgot that it was also a world of pain. It beckoned to him with alluring arms; he loved it, and waited patiently for the time of his return to it.

In the monastery chapel, when the organ rolled and the freed voices of the monks rang up to heaven's gates, the dead woman came to him again and again, but not to whisper reproaches; she brought him peace. As he communed with the pure spirit of Madeleine Ivry, the Stranger gradually learned to understand how he had sinned against her, not in actual deed or word, but in a thousand little ways which must have stung her to the quick. And all the while that he recalled his own shortcomings to the dead woman, he became conscious that some of these brown-robed phantoms of men, these wraiths of human beings, were human also in their inability to shut out the world.

He had a vague hope, a shadowy expectancy,

that before he left the monastery something would happen to free his own soul from its bondage to regret; that a great sacrifice would yet be demanded of him ere he could go forth to rejoin his fellows. He wanted to wipe out the past, to re-enter the world with clean hands. In his heart, he thanked Father Brunot for affording him the practical opportunity of discovering how often 'Days are lost lamenting o'er lost days.' It seemed to him that up to the present, he had not even justified his own existence.

Between the Stranger and the anguished faces of the kneeling monks, there was ever Elise to call him back to the world. He knew that she waited to welcome him, that she would not forget. And still he lingered at Mahota, watching for the sign which was to set him free. He did not know how or whence it would come, but some day there would be a message for him if he were worthy to receive it. At last the message reached him through the ill-doing of a woman he had never seen, whose name he did not know—a woman who had left her searing stain on the hearts of two Trappists, unable to forget her even in the penitential silence and gloom of Mahota.

This unseen woman came to Mahota and tore the hearts of two monks within it. The Stranger, looking on when the two men met, noticed their

glances cross. Some instinct whispered to him that Brother Hyacinthe and Brother Aloysius had not been strangers to one another before they entered the monastery. Brother Hyacinthe's eyes blazed with hate ; Brother Aloysius looked meek forgiveness, whereat the other frowned more fiercely than before, and, if no monks were nigh, rudely jostled Brother Aloysius's frail form out of the muddy path.

Although the first warning snow of winter had fallen during the night, the Ottawa River had not yet begun to freeze. In spite of the perpetual silence of the brethren, round the outbuildings of the monastery there were signs of active preparations for the coming cold. The cattle had been called up from distant fields, the vines stretched on the ground and covered with straw, and the lay-brother who usually spent his day peeling potatoes in the open air at the back of the monastery now sought shelter by the kitchen stove. On the hills surrounding the monastery serried rows of maples stood leafless and rigid, the dull green of occasional pines showing sombrely through them against the leaden sky. Habitants, bringing milk to the cheese factory, shook their heads knowingly as they prophesied the imminent snowfall—a blanket of white which would shut them from the outer world until spring. The coming of the snow

always brought with it a feeling of awe, although they were provisioned to stand a siege, and would lie as snugly in their little houses during the winter as squirrels in a nest.

Inside the monastery barns, the monks were busily engaged putting up stalls for the large herd of cows to be fed and sheltered there. Most of the monks had tied their robes round their waists in order that they might work with greater freedom. The only sounds which broke the stillness were the occasional creak of a saw, or the ringing of hammers on nail-heads. The rules of their order forbade the monks to speak. They worked in silence, leaving off at intervals to wipe the sweat from their brows as the monastery bell tolled to remind them of their mortality. In the little burial-ground of the monastery there was also a half-dug grave which fulfilled the same purpose. When a monk feared death, he went to the graveyard and lay down in the half-filled grave. Then he came back, stained by the earth which would one day cover him, and silently prayed as he toiled.

It was a life of constant intercession, prayer, work. All the monks who laboured in the barns bore upon their brows the seal of silence. Some faces were good, some bad, some divinely peaceful and happy, others diabolically wicked. But upon

them all was the sad, ineffaceable brand which separated them from their fellows. These men had voluntarily quitted the world for a living tomb; whether they regretted it or not, there was no retracing their steps. What use had the world for a man false to his obligations? If he left the monastery, he would be shunned and despised; if he remained there, he condemned himself to perpetual silence, shut out all the sweetness of living, became practically a dead man who still walked the earth brooding over the wrongs and sufferings of his past life—a man to whom the touch of a woman's hand, the clinging fingers of a little child, must ever be denied.

The monks sought the dormitories at eight, and rose from their straw pallets at two in the morning to worship for three hours in the monastery chapel. Then they went forth into the fields after a scanty breakfast of bread and water to labour until midday. There was a short rest for recreation after a frugal dinner of bread and vegetables, and the monotonous round began again until the evening meal. The cost of each monk's food was a halfpenny a day. The brethren made their own clothes and shoes, Brother Aloysius planning and cutting out the robes—white for the monks, brown for the lay brothers. An absolute familiarity with death had robbed it of all terrors for these patient

cenobites. When a monk died his brethren covered his face with a linen cloth, and he was carried coffinless through the dark night, in his brown robe, to the graveyard.

'All was ended now, the hope, and the fear, and the sorrow;
All the aching of heart, the restless, unsatisfied longing;
All the dull, deep pain, and constant anguish of patience.'

His place knew him no more. When the tidings reached the monastery that the parent of a monk had died, the abbot called the brethren together to pray for the soul of the father or mother of one of them. He did not say whose father or mother, in order that by this fresh trial of faith all might learn to know how vain and weak are earthly ties to lure the steadfast spirit from its upward way.

Jardot, in his customary desire to return home —the nearer he approached the monastery, the more quickly his spirits fell to zero—hurried down the valley. He wanted, if possible, to get back to Bonneville before more snow fell. The Stranger accompanied him to the monastery gate, shook hands, and turned back again. In imagination he was with Jardot, listening to the voices of the Bush, watching the flow of the river that he loved, or passing through the tall trees which hid the château from him.

The noonday bell rang, and the Stranger, awakening from his reverie, saw that swarthy Brother Hyacinthe laid down his saw with an air of relief, folded his hands, and walked slowly in the direction of the monastery. He did not see, however, that Brother Hyacinthe, once on the threshold, raised his eyes to the sky with a despairing look, gave an expressive shrug of his brawny shoulders, and went down the long passage which led to the corridor where the monks assembled for their hour of recreation—recreations so sad that to witness them brought tears to the eyes. Halfway down the corridor, Brother Hyacinthe stopped to gaze through an open door—the door of a meanly-furnished little room in which a great stove gave out an overpowering heat. Mild-faced Brother Aloysius sat there making robes for the brethren. Long strips of rough, heavy material, out of which the robes were fashioned, hung from nails on the wooden walls, and three great irons were being heated at the stove to press the seams of an already completed robe. As Brother Hyacinthe looked into the room, his eyes fell upon the frail, stooping form of Brother Aloysius. Brother Aloysius was thin and worn with much fasting and penitential scourging; he coughed patiently from time to time; his face was angelically sweet. When he looked up and met

the fiery glance of Brother Hyacinthe, he crossed himself and turned away.

It was easy to see that these two had met in the world, that there was some bond of hate between them from which neither could escape—some bond which was ever drawing them together—a bond made more bitter by the enforced silence of monastic days. Where one was the other instinctively felt his presence. For years past the savage hate in Brother Hyacinthe's heart, in spite of prayer and penal scourge, had grown steadily. By some strange chance, in that far distant world which was half blotted from their memories, they had loved the same woman—a woman who had been equally false to them both. Overcome by the raging madness of despair, they sought the monastery of Mahota, there to escape all thought of this woman whom they had loved—this woman who had slain them both as surely as though she had put the knife against their throats and gashed a gaping wound.

But even in the soul-deadening routine of the monastery, there was no escape from her. When they prayed to the Holy Virgin, her eyes were the unholy eyes of the woman they had loved; when they went forth into the fields to perform their daily tasks, she accompanied them, unseen, but ever present; when they returned through the dim

shades of falling night, weary, footsore, half dead from fatigue, she walked between and drew them to her once again. Sometimes Brother Hyacinthe saw her standing at the head of his pallet as the moonlight shone into the long dormitory, and the midnight silence was broken by the restless sighing and coughing of his brother monks. Only at that time did Brother Aloysius find peace, for, of a slighter build than Brother Hyacinthe, the toil, fasting, and privations of the day wore out his frail body until he slept as soundly as a little child. Often, however, Brother Hyacinthe, rising from his pallet, and pacing with noiseless, tiger steps the stone floor of the dormitory, raised his gnarled and knotted hands, muttering imprecations against this woman whom he hated. After these outbursts, however, he always sought the abbot, confessed his sin, did penance, and received absolution, only to struggle once more against the malign influence of the woman who had slain his soul. Although nothing feminine was ever allowed to set foot in Mahota, this woman came unbidden, unseen—was always between these two men who had fled from her and the world. It seemed as if she resented their attempt to escape from her toils, her Circean allurements, and had resolved that for them there should be no respite. Meek Brother Aloysius bore his sufferings unflinchingly. When

he prayed for this woman, it was with childlike pity and love. Although he prayed unceasingly that her soul might once more become white, he inflicted upon himself the severest possible penances, always regarding her with loving tenderness, and scourged his suffering body to win her future salvation.

Brother Hyacinthe passed slowly along the corridor, goaded to madness that Brother Aloysius prayed for him. He did not want to be prayed for by Brother Aloysius; he would rather have been cursed. There was still the memory of that woman between them, the woman who persecuted them both. He could see now the siren eyes, the gleaming white shoulders, the loveliness of her lips, the slender figure which dragged him down to hell. He cursed her, cursed her, cursed her—and strode on. If he could only revisit the world, how he would rend her limb from limb, disfigure that fair face, crush her lying loveliness into the dust! If he could only meet her again! Only once! He would take Brother Aloysius' hot irons and sear her eyes out. Ah, if it were possible!—if it were possible!

Brother Aloysius put down a hot iron with which he had been pressing a newly-finished robe, and sighed as the retreating footsteps of Brother Hyacinthe died away. Laying aside his work,

he entered the great hall, and went straight to his favourite window-seat, where he was illuminating a missal with pictures of the saints. For more than a month past, during this hour of recreation, he had painted the Holy Virgin and Child. Even his dull, tortured heart thrilled with exultation as he thought how full of promise the painting was, how it needed but a few more strokes of the brush to be complete. What was his dismay as he drew near the window-seat to find that someone had carelessly upset a glass of water over the open missal, and that the labour of more than a month was practically ruined.

Brother Aloysius sighed again, and prayed that he might not in his guilty heart deem this the work of an enemy. Then he took up his brushes and attempted to repair the damage.

He did not know that a few feet away Brother Hyacinthe regarded him with intense hate, his cowl drawn well over his head, his eyes blazing like live coals. When Brother Hyacinthe saw the meek monk once more resume his labours he impatiently folded his hands, and, with slow, measured steps, withdrew from the hall. As he went out, there were several lay brothers kneeling before the various stations of the Cross, a ghostly light filtered through the narrow windows. To

Brother Hyacinthe the ghostly light seemed to be full of fiery flame, for an irresistible temptation suddenly took possession of him. He could no longer endure the proximity of the man he hated —the man who rendered it impossible for him to escape from all memory of the woman they had both loved. He would destroy Brother Aloysius and himself at the same time, and thus find a way of freeing themselves from the burden of anguished days and penitential nights.

Filled with these murderous thoughts, Brother Hyacinthe stole silently along the corridor. Perpetual vigils, the haunting presence of the unseen woman, scanty food, the appalling routine of his daily life, had done their slowly culminating work. For the moment he was insane, with all a madman's cunning.

Alone in the corridor, he looked fearfully round, but there was no one in sight, for the farm-hands of the monastery had all gone to their mid-day meal. Even the swineherd was not to be seen. The only sound which broke the stillness was the dull, low tolling of the chapel bell; it seemed to knell the passing of his own soul.

For a little while he hesitated, then stole quickly down the corridor, and, coming to the room where Brother Aloysius had been at work, looked furtively in. There was no one there. Before

leaving the room, Brother Aloysius had heaped fresh logs in the stove. They crackled and sputtered, and cast a cheerful glow over the stone floor. The reflection of the flames danced upon the gloomy walls ; the irons which Brother Aloysius had placed in front of the stove were almost red hot.

Brother Hyacinthe looked stealthily round, seized several pieces of the rough thick cloth and a handful of linen shreds, and pushed them into the open mouth of the stove.

The linen and cloth flared up in a moment. It seemed to Brother Hyacinthe that they would die away too quickly to do any harm.

At his wits' end to effect his purpose, he thrust a long wooden bench in the stove, leaned the other end against the wooden wall, poured oil from a lamp over the bench, and went away. No one would come near the place for at least a quarter of an hour.

He returned to the great hall and surveyed Brother Aloysius's attempts at work with malicious satisfaction. So absorbed were the monks in their devotions, that they noticed nothing ; then the acrid smell of burning cloth and wood brought them back to the earth from which they had so completely detached themselves. As the smoke grew thicker and poured into the hall, they

realized that the monastery was on fire. Even in an emergency like this, the force of habit was too much for them, and, not daring to speak, they looked pitifully at one another. An ancient monk, who was the first to recover his presence of mind, motioned to the brethren to follow him, and one by one they glided away through the film of gray smoke to seek for water.

Brother Aloysius was the last to leave his place, for he had gradually become completely absorbed in his efforts to repair the damage done to the painting, and was insensible to the approach of the fire until the smoke made him cough. When he looked up, he found himself in a world of gray smoke, through which flashed Brother Hyacinthe's fiery eyes.

As Brother Hyacinthe pointed a menacing finger in the direction of Brother Aloysius's little room, it suddenly dawned upon the gentle monk that he was responsible for this appalling catastrophe.

Hastily rising from his knees, he spread a sheet of paper over his beloved painting in a futile attempt to save it from destruction, and glided through the gray mist towards the door. He could not find it.

When he looked round in bewilderment, the eyes of Brother Hyacinthe still glared fiercely

at him through the ever-increasing smoke-wreaths.

He felt along the walls and again missed the door. Brother Hyacinthe stood beside him. The rules of their order forbade speech; but if ever human eyes spoke eloquently, they were the mild, dove-like orbs of Brother Aloysius as he gazed up at Brother Hyacinthe and placed a trembling hand on his arm.

Brother Hyacinthe contemptuously shook it off, and opened the door. Brother Aloysius followed him thankfully, under the delusion that his enemy wanted to save his life.

Once on the other side of the door, Brother Hyacinthe led the way, occasionally thrusting out an iron hand to drag Brother Aloysius forward.

After what seemed an interminable space of time, but was in reality only a few seconds, they reached Brother Aloysius's little room, in which the fire raged fiercely.

Outside the monastery, they heard the wild clanging of the alarm bell. The narrow stream of water in the valley had run nearly dry, and there were only two wells in front of the monastery. A windlass creaked as the water was slowly drawn to the top in buckets pitifully small.

Tongues of flame leaped and licked at them through the thickening volume of smoke.

'At last! At last!' thundered the hoarse voice of Brother Hyacinthe. 'The devil has delivered you into my hands at last. Ah! At last! At last!'

His long, sinewy fingers closed round Brother Aloysius's throat.

Brother Aloysius had no thought of resistance, but breathed a prayer for the soul of the woman he had once loved with an earthly passion.

Brother Hyacinthe shifted his hold and grasped Brother Aloysius round the waist to cast him into the blazing room. Suddenly the Stranger rushed through the smoke, seized Brother Aloysius in his strong arms, and endeavoured to drag him away from Brother Hyacinthe. Even in that terrible moment he had time to reflect that if he gave his life for Brother Aloysius, he would in some measure atone for his own useless existence.

Brother Hyacinthe, maddened by the thought of losing his victim, struck the Stranger heavily across the brow with a burning brand—a portion of the bench which he had thrust into the stove.

But he was too late. One strenuous effort and the Stranger wrested the half-suffocated Brother Aloysius from the madman's grasp. With a howl of rage, Brother Hyacinthe tripped against the stone sill of the doorway . . . fell back into the flames . . . was swallowed up.

Carrying Brother Aloysius in his arms, the Stranger staggered blindly along the corridor. He was about to fall with one last despairing cry, when the way became clear, the soft hand of a woman led him forth from the flames. Jardot rushed up with a shout of joy, took the insensible monk from his arms, caught the swaying form of the Stranger, laid him gently upon the ground, and hurried for water.

The Stranger felt the pressure of a woman's hand upon his wound. At the touch of her healing fingers, he opened his eyes and saw the face of Madeleine Ivry shining from the battlements of the Celestial City. He had won within the gates.

When he again recovered consciousness Jardot bent over him, dashing water in his face, while the broncho sniffed at his scorched garments.

'What's the matter?' he gasped. 'What has happened? Is it all a dream?'

A snowflake fell upon his parched lips, and gradually over the tall pines, the crests of the encircling hills, the rugged sides of the valley, there spread a white film which blurred the horizon, blotted out the green pastures, mingled with the flames of the burning monastery.

But the falling snow had little or no effect upon the fire. Until the light waned, the monks formed a living chain to the wells, and with never a word passed their water buckets from hand to hand. Occasionally, a man fell exhausted. The chain formed up until he recovered and again staggered into line.

Others had thrown off their long white robes and laboured with feverish energy, breathing like tired horses. Their robes, hurriedly cast aside, assumed strange forms, the ground looked like a battlefield strewn with the recumbent bodies of the slain. Jardot hastily explained to the Stranger that he had seen the smoke of the burning monastery at a distance, and had galloped back again.

The white figures of the Trappists mingled with the brown forms of the lay-brothers, who also laboured in the same sad silence to extinguish the flames. Some of the neighbouring farmers drove away the frightened horses. Two or three

Percherons, stupefied, maddened with terror, tried to rush headlong into the flames.

In the midst of their strenuous labours, the monks and lay-brothers alike suddenly ceased to pass the water from hand to hand. Jardot dropped his own bucket in amazement, for they were praying ; and even as they silently prayed, the flames again broke out, the walls crashed in, the smoke from the burning buildings floated up to meet and mingle with the fast-falling snow.

Another great tongue of flame shot through the smoke, revealing the sad-faced monks on their knees, their hands clasped in prayer, their cowls thrown backward. The flame wavered a moment, flickered hither and thither with the wind, made one or two little fitful spurts, and died down. The monks were homeless.

A ghostly form glided up to the Stranger, knelt beside him, wan lips gently kissed his scarred brow, and Brother Aloysius tottered away to rejoin the white-robed host.

The Stranger struggled stiffly from the ground. Realizing the narrowness of his escape, he fell upon his knees and joined in the monks' mute prayer.

Presently a long line of figures, preceded by a great cross, emerged from the falling snow. The

foremost monks carried something charred and burned and huddled upon a rude litter. With eyes fixed on the ground, they filed slowly down the hill through the gray of the fast-coming night.

The Stranger watched them as the procession wound about the hillside, was blotted out by the snow, swallowed up in silence.

Jardot, with a half sob, half prayer, kept his eyes fixed on the monks until they were lost to sight.

'The good God shelter them, the good God pity them,' he murmured brokenly. 'These "Children of Sorrow" know not where to lay their heads.'

Even as he spoke, the monastery bell, ringing in its fall, toppled down from a column of masonry.

Jardot shivered, and, taking out his fiddle, began to play of hope and love, of the sweet joys of earth, of the kindness that endears all human souls to one another, the sacred mysteries of man and maid, of wifehood and fatherhood, of flower and song, of moonlight and starshine, the hushed silence of the hills before the rosy coming of the dawn. And as he played, he wept for very joy that God had freed these prisoned

monks and brought them forth into His world again.

The Stranger touched him gently.

'Come, Jardot, come. God's mantle covers all. The sweet world waits. Come!'

XVI

CAUGHT!

THE Stranger handed Madame de Montgenais half a dozen mortgages, with the seals and signatures cut off.

'All the Seigneur's liabilities are wiped out for about eight thousand pounds,' he said, in matter-of-fact tones. 'My solicitors have just sent me on the papers.'

Madame de Montgenais dropped the crackling parchments in astonishment. The Stranger stooped and picked them up.

'The Seigneur is a free man again,' he said laconically. 'Free to return to his beloved Paris and leave us in peace. He says that people always approve of him in Paris. Perhaps that is why they disapprove of him here.'

Her black eyes sparkled with delight.

'But why have you done this? Did Elise wish you to do so? It is a piece of silly Quixotism.'

The Stranger shrugged his shoulders.

'Oh, I wanted to make some return to you for your goodness to us, and I couldn't fight him without causing a fuss. Besides, Elise thinks I have had enough narrow escapes to last me for a lifetime. The money is nothing to me. The most important thing about it is that it will give the Seigneur an opportunity to behave decently.'

'But he will not take such a thing at your hands.'

'Of course not; that would be fatal. He would insist on fighting me if I were to insult him in such a way.'

'But who then is to—to insult him?'

'You are,' said the Stranger calmly. 'You do everything with such grace that he prefers your insults to the compliments of others.'

'But you are insulting me now. How can I take credit for your generosity?'

'My generosity! Oh, it is nothing—absolutely nothing. When I think of all you have done for Elise, I could cheerfully beggar myself.'

She smiled.

'If you were a beggar, you could not marry Elise.'

'Yes, I could. We should always have the mill and the hut to fall back upon. We intend to spend our honeymoon there.'

Madame de Montgenais sighed.

'Youth! Youth! Youth! After all, there is nothing like it.'

'Not when you are happy again,' suggested the Stranger. 'One has to suffer first in order to understand how to be happy.'

'Happy! Yes. I'm afraid you will never lose that scar upon your forehead.'

'Though the monk struck shrewdly, in making one wound he healed another. If I am ever in danger of forgetting how unworthy I am of Elise, that scar will remind me.'

She looked at him earnestly.

'You are quite sure you do not regret anything?'

'I regret everything—in a way. There is something almost indecent in being so happy, for there is one wrong I can never undo. I made a perfectly blameless woman miserable all through my infernal selfishness. She dies, and I live to —to forget her and be happy with Elise.'

'There is always one thing you can do. You can wipe out the past by being good to Elise. If Madeleine Ivry has taught you the sacredness of woman's love, she has not died in vain.'

'Is the breaking of one woman's heart to——'

'Make the happiness of another's?' she interrupted. 'If you had not suffered in your turn,

you might have remained an egoist. Thank God that He gave you the capacity for suffering. You were young, and youth is supremely selfish. We always have to find out these things for ourselves. No one else's experience will come home to us. That is why life becomes so much more interesting the older we get; we know more.' She sighed heavily. 'After all, grown men and women are little children crying for the toys they see around them; and, failing to attain these toys, they are just as unhappy as the child who cries for the moon.'

He took her hand. Was this sad-eyed, melancholy being the brilliant, cynical woman who constantly bombarded the Seigneur with epigrams, who irritated and annoyed him a hundred times a day until he went down to the river bank to give words to his anger—words unmeet for a lady's ears?

'Are you not happy? You have done so much for us that I want to make you happy, too.'

Madame de Montgenais indignantly turned her head aside.

'No, I am not happy, middle-aged fool that I am. If I were a callow schoolgirl, I could understand myself. I am too—too ripe.' A smile came to her lips. 'I despise the Seigneur, and yet——'

'Yet?'

'You see,' she said irrelevantly, 'he took me in his arms when I was a child, and——'

'And?'

'We are all creatures of habit. I can't help wishing to be a child again. But then——'

'Well?'

'The trouble is that since then his arms have become so elastic. They have been open to so many children of a larger growth—all feminine ones.'

The Stranger smiled.

'Be a little more gentle with him. Then he will reform.'

'No; that's not the way to keep him. If a man thinks he can have anything for the asking, he doesn't want it. Neither does a woman.'

'What are you going to do? You don't mean to leave him to his own devices?'

She picked up the parchments.

'Win him by a sham,' she said bitterly. 'There's no other way out of it. Father Brunot has planned it all, step by step. What he purposely failed to explain to me, I have since guessed.'

'Father Brunot?'

'Yes. We are only the puppets, he pulls the strings.'

'I don't understand you. I know that he has done much for us, but not how much.'

'It is time you knew all the details. Belaine is not very far from here.'

'What has Belaine to do with it?' He grew pale.

She turned aside in order not to see his face.

'Father Brunot was Madeleine Ivry's confessor. She came home to die after you had broken her heart by your contemptuous silence. She was full of romance, and hoped that you would come to her and say that you could not live without her. Alas! she could not live without you; and you never came.'

'Ah-h!'

She faced him.

'We must get it over,' she said desperately. 'It is time you realized that we were all puppets in the hands of Father Brunot. Most of us were ignorant puppets, but I am the puppet who knows. Not even the Seigneur has any idea that Father Brunot holds him fast in a hundred ways if he chooses to exercise his power. It was through Father Brunot's instrumentality that you received Madeleine Ivry's message; he sent her cousin to you with it; but he had not guessed the man's love for Madeleine Ivry. If her cousin had killed you, Father Brunot would have lost the game; there would have been no one to

pay off the Seigneur's liabilities and make Bonneville as prosperous as of old. Father Brunot, who knows everything, is, of course, aware of what you have done. Had you not done it, he would have felt it his duty to ask you to do it, heretic though you are. Now that the Seigneur is free from debt, Father Brunot will take him in hand through me, and win all round.'

'But Elise and I are Protestants.'

'That doesn't matter. The Seigneur is not; I am not. If the Seigneur were to marry a Protestant, it would unsettle things here and do away with all the influence he might otherwise have. That is one of the reasons, in addition to his tender sympathy for everything that suffers, that Father Brunot prevented the Seigneur from marrying Elise. When things were growing desperate, he came to me and told me what to do. I was to win Elise's confidence and protect her, and gradually wean the Seigneur from his silly project. The Seigneur must be brought back into the fold of Holy Church. I am to bring him back.'

'It is your own wish?'

'It would have been the same in any event. If I marry the Seigneur I can induce him to settle down, become a model of propriety, reconcile himself to the Church, make amends for his

past misdeeds, go to Mass on Sundays, look after the welfare of his neighbours, throw open the château as a centre of hospitality for the whole province. But to do this he must be free from debt.'

'Is it possible to keep him free from debt?'

'That was what puzzled Father Brunot; to find the Seigneur a Catholic wife and get his debts paid. He is a shrewd judge of character, and soon discovered that, in spite of her life at the convent, Elise was much too decided a girl ever to become a convert. He knew you were rich. He would obtain the Seigneur's consent to your marrying Elise, and trust to your generosity to free the Seigneur in some anonymous way from his embarrassments. It was necessary also that I should pique the Seigneur into caring for me.'

'But this is infamous!'

'Oh no, it is not. Father Bruno promised Madeleine Ivry to save your soul by awakening you to the knowledge that life is not to be lived wholly for self; that when a woman gives her heart to a man, the least a man can do in return is not to take her love for granted, but to live for her instead of for himself. And he has kept his word, imperilled his own salvation for the sake of a heretic, toiled early and late to make you

see things in their true light. The rest all grew out of his promise to her. It was no plot.'

The Stranger was mortified.

'It comes perilously near it.'

'Think of this humble parish priest, his devotion, his courage, his endurance, his love for his people, his vigils and penances, his intercession for their sins—see him galloping through the winter night, ringing the death-bell as he carries consolation to some poor moribund—see him swimming the sullen river to succour the helpless—see him ministering to his people, counselling the young, comforting the old, bringing husband and wife together, reconciling father and son, helping here, there, and everywhere, never studying his own wants, but often going hungry to feed a wandering tramp! When I think of Father Brunot and the life he leads, I am ashamed of my own selfish, useless existence. I am ashamed!'

'I fear that I have wronged him. But you must not sacrifice yourself to the Seigneur to help Father Brunot.'

'It is no sacrifice. If I were a young girl, it might be; but I have no ideals, no illusions. I have lived my life, mixed with the great world, know men and women, and the lesson of it all is

that I do not expect too much. In youth, we want our happiness to be perfect; a stain on the honour of one we love, stains us also. We are rent and torn with anguish; we renounce the happiness which might be ours because we have not the patience, the self-denial, to take what the world offers us instead of what we think it ought to give us.'

'We cannot help ourselves,' he said, somewhat ruefully.

'Ah, but we should. When you are as old as I am, you will discover that all life is a compromise. Bethink you, is it not better to accept the shreds and patches if we cannot get the perfect garment? Cannot a woman's love bring the shreds and patches together again, until it is as we dreamed it should be? The Seigneur's weak point is that he cannot bear irony, ridicule. If he were to know that I really love him, I should be at his mercy. As long as I can tantalize him, always be a little out of his reach, never allow him to feel sure of me, I shall be a happy woman. And he has worn the cap and bells so long that he must be tired of them by this time—perhaps secretly looks forward to all that should accompany reverend age.'

'And you will fearlessly venture on so stormy an experiment?'

All Madame de Montgenais' courage came back to her.

'Of course. You have no idea how interesting it will be. Some women would for ever sail on summer seas. I like to fight the storm and overcome it. Here is the Seigneur. Go and join Elise, and I will bring him to the point. Get through the French window before he sees you.'

The Seigneur came in somewhat fretfully.

'I thought I heard voices.'

Madame de Montgenais gave him her hand to kiss, a favour which he appreciated the more because of its rarity.

'Your ward marries to-morrow. You do not seem to realize that I must leave the château at the same time.'

'Leave the château—leave me!' The Seigneur vainly endeavoured to hide his perturbation. 'Leave me! What do you mean?'

'Won't you sit down? I mean what I say. The only thing which made it possible for me to stay here, was the fact of your ward being under the same roof. When she goes I must, of necessity, go also.'

'You are in a great hurry, madame.'

The Seigneur regarded her somewhat ruefully.

'When I first came here, you were in even a greater hurry to see me depart. If I mistake

not, that was when you hungered for bread-and-butter.'

The Seigneur bowed.

'Madame, a taste for bread-and-butter is like the measles; it runs its course.'

'And, like the measles, it makes one somewhat ridiculous in the running.'

The Seigneur peevishly started to his feet.

'I thought you were my friend. Why remind me of such a truism?'

'Oh, well, your memory is so bad.'

'You have improved it vastly since your stay here. I can remember every gadfly sting you have inflicted upon me—stings which I have borne with all the courtesy of——'

'An old friend.'

'Friend!' The Seigneur gazed at her blankly. 'Now that Paris is impossible, what is to become of me when I am left to my own devices? Ma foi, it is such a commonplace ending to feed the pickerel in the river.'

'And so ignominious.'

'And—and so messy,' reflected the Seigneur. 'To think of one's face being gnawed by eels! Ugh!' He turned fiercely upon her. 'Why couldn't you have been born twenty years earlier? Then——'

'Then?'

She dropped her handkerchief, and the Seigneur somewhat stiffly knelt to pick it up.

'The attitude seems so natural that I may as well finish what I have to say here,' he suggested. 'It is long since I have been at a woman's feet.'

'Provided that the matter of your speech is not as strained as your attitude, I will listen to you.'

'Very well, then, madame. I have something to say to you. Some years ago I paid you the compliment of asking you to elope with me, and you declined.'

'Compliment! It all depends upon the point of view.'

'Yes, I think you said as much at the time. You declined.'

'I declined.'

'Perhaps you will be good enough to favour me with your reasons. It is a little late in the day, but it would be interesting to hear them.'

'My reasons? Oh, with pleasure. Had I eloped with you, it would have annoyed Monsieur de Montgenais; and when he was annoyed, the gout always threatened to fly to his stomach.'

'From what I remember of Monsieur de Montgenais, I am inclined to be sorry for the gout. Perhaps you were wise not to listen to me, although I was not poor then. Now that my property has gone to the dogs, is mortgaged up

to the hilt, there is only one courtesy left to me before I make a ridiculous exit from the stage of life.'

'And that is?'

'To pay you the conventional compliment of asking you to marry me before I blow out my brains.'

'You could not very well do so afterwards,' she retorted. 'Blow out your brains! There is not much originality about that.'

'You don't know what a disfigurement it would be,' gloomily suggested the Seigneur. 'My face, though a trifle timeworn, suits me so admirably that I should be loth to disfigure it.'

'Vanity! Vanity! Vanity! You have no fear? No repentance?'

'I am not afraid to die, and I do not repent. Faith and fear are merely matters of temperament,' airily quoth the Seigneur. 'My only regret is to leave you. You irritate me so much that I never have time for the vapours.'

'But my dear Seigneur'—she laid one white hand gently on his shoulder—'have you ever reflected that a——'

She bubbled with laughter.

'This is no laughing matter, madame,' cried the Seigneur. 'I am perfectly serious. Let me tell you that a man with a bullet through his head

is not at all a picturesque object. Have I reflected about what?'

'That a live ass—forgive me, Seigneur, for the comparison, but I cannot think of anything more appropriate in the moral tension of the moment—have you ever reflected that a live ass is better than a dead lion?'

'I should have the pleasure of giving you my name for a brief moment, and then—a stroll in the Bush—the accidental discharge of a gun—the thing is done.'

She repressed a shudder.

'But what if I accept your proposal? Would you still kill yourself?'

'Yes. The estate might leave enough for you to live on in tolerable comfort. I understand that you have spent most of the money left to you by Monsieur de Montgenais. Were the seigneury unencumbered, I could afford to live; but there isn't enough to support us both. You must remember that our tastes are Parisian. On the whole, you merit a better ending than myself. You might have accepted my invitation to elope with me and the end would have come so much sooner.'

'But you were not ashamed to want to marry Elise for her money?'

'My dear madame, I acted without due re-

flection. A woman of your penetration cannot have failed to observe how my attentions to her have cooled off. After meeting you again, no amount of money could by any possibility reconcile me to such a marriage. If I were married to my ward, where on earth should I spend my evenings?'

'The question is as difficult to answer as if you had said heaven instead of earth. You would prefer to spend them with me?'

'Caviare is so—so much more appetizing than bread-and-butter,' suggested the Seigneur. 'Even as a child, I soon learned to know the difference. Ma foi, what it is to be cursed with a sensitive palate! An undue sensitiveness has ever been at the root of my greatest misfortunes.'

'You really think so?' She shut her fan with an emphatic click. 'I must confess, my dear Seigneur, that, waiving all other disadvantages, I should be inclined to accept your proposal if the seigneury were unencumbered.'

The Seigneur, still on his knees, again kissed her hand.

'You would almost reconcile one to poverty,' he declared, with the nearest approach to enthusiasm he had ever displayed.

'You could not bear poverty for my sake? Not even though you were to make an effort?'

'My dear madame, I should lose my temper; and when I lose my temper I am not a pleasant companion. You would regret that I had thoughtlessly postponed my departure for the Happy Hunting Grounds.'

He got up with a decided air. Madame de Montgenais rose also.

'Then it is to be good-bye?'

'Alas! yes. It is to be good-bye. If you were a little girl, I would again claim the privilege I once possessed of taking you in my arms.'

'Your arms were unsullied—then.'

The lightning of her glance would have shrivelled anyone else to the dust.

The Seigneur shrugged his shoulders.

'What would you, madame? What would you? Paris is Paris, and men are—men! I hold it cowardly to shirk consequences. Had I earlier realized the fascination of what you now so justly deny me, perhaps there would have been no consequences. I don't know. I only make the suggestion.'

'Ah! I have made you feel at last.'

The Seigneur looked at her ruefully.

'Excuse me. The only thoughtless act you ever committed. Made me feel? For the moment—yes. Pardon me for reminding you

that the occasion, although mirthful from your point of view, is somewhat serious from mine.'

'I will—on one condition.'

'And that is?'

'You consider that I am a little girl again.'

The Seigneur took her into his arms. As he did so, the papers in her hand rustled to the floor.

'The years fall from me at the touch of your lips, madame.'

He bowed, and was about to leave the room.

Panting, flushed, breathless, she pointed to the papers.

'Pick them up! Pick them up!'

The Seigneur, though still somewhat stiff from unwonted kneeling, picked up the papers.

'I am not accustomed to the attitude of prayer,' he remarked, handing her the documents. 'It has always seemed to me somewhat artificial.'

'But you have not looked at the papers—the parchments! Read! Read! Read! How slow you are!'

'They do not concern me.'

'Read, I say! Read!'

He took back the papers with polite indifference and began to skim through them, lightly humming an air as he did so. His expression changed to one of surprise.

'What's this? What's this? The mortgages on the seigneury—cancelled?'

'Yes—cancelled!'

'Then my proposal holds good?'

'Your proposal holds good. I accept it.'

The Seigneur's lips trembled for a fraction of a second as he bowed again.

'Madame, your conduct leaves me only one regret. I thought I understood women. If I were to avail myself of your sublime generosity, that dog of a priest would have me yet. It is more dignified to——'

He turned aside, drew a revolver out of his pocket, put it to his forehead, and was about to pull the trigger when Madame de Montgenais snatched the pistol from him, turned it to her own breast.

'Swear to live or I will kill myself!' she cried fiercely.

The Seigneur bowed assent.

'I am not so hopelessly wrong about women after all,' he reflected. 'My evenings promise to be even more interesting than I had dared to hope. Women owe much to men also; they would find life more than dull without us. Now I must call upon Father Brunot and settle myself.'

* * * * *

The Seigneur's wedding was a very grand

affair, its gorgeous ritual and solemn music quite eclipsing the simple ceremony which united the Stranger to Elise. Before the guests left the château, the Seigneur, in his attempt to prove how he had been misunderstood, achieved a speech which, for simple-hearted integrity, its manifest love for the inhabitants of Bonneville, its absorbing desire to render them happy, almost made Jardot and his wife believe that they had cruelly misjudged him. Then came the protracted farewells, and Elise, after whispering a few words in her husband's ear, suddenly disappeared.

The guests departed *en masse*, the majority of them crowding down to the station to see the Seigneur and his bride start for Ottawa. At the station, they found Gran'père Labelle's chair placed in somewhat perilous proximity to the waiting train.

Gran'père Labelle grasped his pipe in one hand, an ornate address in the other; but just before the arrival of the sleighs with the wedding party, he went to sleep, and was held up in his chair by Margot, whilst her husband, with grandiose air, read out the flowery document which described the Seigneur's countless virtues.

'We look upon you,' it concluded, 'as the real father of your people.'

Gran'père Labelle woke up and confirmed this

statement with an enthusiastic wave of his pipe.

'Nom de pipe, c'est vrai, c'est actuellement vrai!' he shrilled, and went to sleep again.

Under cover of the excitement caused by the departing train, Father Brunot stole away and joined the Stranger at the château gates. They plunged into the Bush, came to the little snow-bepowdered glade, and knocked at the hut door as the rising moon flooded the frozen mill-stream with its silvery light.

The door opened, and Elise, clad in Mackinaw blanket and Indian costume, came out. She knelt with the Stranger before Father Brunot.

Father Brunot placed a hand upon the head of each and blessed them.

'Dwell here for a space, my children, before the great world calls you hence. Minister unto one another, bear with one another, understand one another. So live, that death has no terrors for you; so die, that eternity shall open to your rapt vision when you have fought the good fight, and the sorrows of life are over. Be charitable and forgiving to one another, even as you hope to be forgiven for your own shortcomings. But above all, love one another. Love one another. And again, I say, love one another!'

He looked long and earnestly into their radiant

faces, again placed tender hands upon their bowed heads, then moved slowly away into the primeval Bush to commune with the unforgotten dead.

The snow-laden cedars bent down jewelled arms of welcome. Inside the hut, a huge log blazed cheerily upon the hearth. As the broncho neighed shrilly from his stall, he was answered with a clarion call by Rube. From the village, came the shouts of the merry-makers. The Stranger raised Elise, placed his strong right arm around her, and she, looking up into his face, entered the hut.

THE END



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